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# **The Articulate Heart**

**Christina Rossetti, William Morris, D. G. Rossetti  
and  
The Pre-Raphaelite Poetry of Love**

by

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**in the Department of English**

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other higher degree or graduate diploma in any tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis or in the footnotes.

*Sa O'Reilly*

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Sao Reilly



For my parents, James and Raye O'Reilly.

## Abstract

This thesis concerns silence and confession; the warring impulse in the poetry of Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti between the necessity of concealing love and the desire to confess it. Lovers have always been torn between the desire to keep silent and the desire to express love and poets have long veered between guardedness and effusion. Yet in the work of the three poets with whom this study is concerned we find a reticence mixed with an avowal of love which is peculiarly their own and peculiarly informative about how these poets regarded the relationship of poetry to love and the relationship of poet to text.

The tension between silence and confession is evident in both the public and personal lyric sequences of the Pre-Raphaelite poets which are 'told' by the poet-singer and their ballads and longer narratives in which the protagonists, usually women, are given their own voices. These women confess much in words but their bodily signs are sometimes even more important than their speech in conveying the sexual and socio-political quandaries in which they find themselves. In their covert manipulations of the traditional forms, structures and techniques of the ballad, romance and epic, the Pre-Raphaelites found a freedom to transgress the accepted boundaries of what could be said about relationships between men and women and in doing so produced radically suggestive poetry.

In the first part of this thesis entitled 'Elegies' I examine first-person lyric sequences. Two of these are well known sonnet sequences: Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* and D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*. The other sequences have for various reasons long remained hidden from scrutiny. William Morris's 'Seasonal Lyrics' (verses for the months) are hidden within the morass of *The Earthly Paradise*. Christina Rossetti's 'By Way of Remembrance' quartet is a long overlooked, starker and darker precursor to both *Monna Innominata* and her striking sequence of Italian poems posthumously published in Italian by William Michael Rossetti as *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* (the first complete English translation of which is included as Appendix A of this thesis) which is perhaps the most personal and obscure of all the poems treated in this thesis.

These sequences along with a body of nominally public lyrics such as those which I have designated Christina Rossetti's 'It' poems, and Morris's fugitive personal lyrics, elegise the death of love whilst celebrating it as the prime human and poetic experience. All three poets experiment with poetry as 'love's last gift'. Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti explore the interconnections between the poet-lover and the love poem. The love poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites is a sometimes voluble, sometimes 'silent' discourse about the impact of love and the loss of love on the identity. The lyric sequences rehearse the story of love's loss alternating bursts of agonised protest with announcements of stoical acceptance; whilst the riddling personal lyrics probe the causes of the disintegration of self and at the same time try to reintegrate that self through the 'self' protection of silence and privacy.

The second part of this thesis is entitled 'Narratives'. I examine how the male Pre-Raphaelite poet constructs the female lover as a legendary character. In Pre-Raphaelite painting the ideal beloved is a silent, beautiful woman 'subtly of herself contemplative'. In Pre-Raphaelite narrative poetry, particularly balladry, the woman is the lover as well as the beloved and she often articulates her love with passionate precision. In Chapter Four I analyse the psychological studies of women in love found in William Morris's tales of *Cupid and Psyche* and *The Lovers of Gudrun*, and I compare the characters of Guenevere as created by William Morris and Alfred Tennyson and Iseult as created by A. C. Swinburne, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold.

In the last chapter of this thesis I deal with Pre-Raphaelite sexual fantasy and gender politics in ballads and longer narrative poems. The Pre-Raphaelites gave themselves great poetic latitude by setting their ballads in faery lands forlorn; using the conventions of fantasy, dream and medievalism they wrote poems concerning nuns and maidens, knights and ladies, and sirens and sorcerers which deliver a rare erotic charge. These poems combine a strangled cry of desire with a sometimes brutal modernity of overt symbol— another type of silence and confession at the heart of the articulation of love in Pre-Raphaelite love poetry.

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Note: The drop cap initials in this thesis were adapted from William Morris designs by Dave Nalle, The Scriptorium Library, Post Office Box 140333, Austin, Texas, 78714.

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It seems an easy thing,  
Mayhap, one day to sing,  
Yet the next day  
We cannot sing nor say.

Keep silence with good heart  
While silence fits our part;  
Another day  
We both shall sing and say.

Keep silence, counting time  
To strike in at the time:  
Prepare to sound,  
Our part is coming round!

Cannot we sing or say?  
In silence let us pray,  
And meditate  
Our love-song while we wait.

— Christina Rossetti

Go, then, poor rhymes, who know my heart indeed,  
And sing to her the words I cannot say.

— William Morris

Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
This close-companioned inarticulate hour  
When two-fold silence was the song of love.

— D. G. Rossetti

## Preface

'So rivers merge in the perpetual sea;  
So luscious fruit must fall when over-ripe;  
And so the consummated P.R.B.'

— Christina Rossetti



HIS study appears at a time when critical response to the Pre-Raphaelite poets is rapidly growing. Since I began researching this thesis several years ago the face of Pre-Raphaelite scholarship has changed; at that time most of the materials readily available to me were dated biographies and near-contemporary eulogistic or condemnatory criticism. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, critics are finally beginning to re-examine the work and lives of the Pre-Raphaelite poets.

Many significant book-length studies treating individual poets have been published in the last twenty years: these include the excellent studies of Christina Rossetti made by Dolores Rosenblum (1986), David A. Kent et al (1987), Antony H. Harrison (1988), and Kathleen J. Mayberry (1989); the studies of William Morris by Blue Calhoun (1975), Carole Silver (1982), Amanda Hodgson (1987), J. M. S. Tompkins (1988), Sabine Foisner (1989) and Frederick Kirchhoff (1990); the studies of D. G. Rossetti by Robert M. Cooper (1970), Ronnalie Roper Howard (1972), Florence Boos (1976), Joan Rees (1981) and David Riede (1983), and Harrison's study of Swinburne (1988).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti, The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), David A. Kent, ed. *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), Kathleen J. Mayberry, *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), Blue Calhoun, *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris: The Earthly Paradise* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), J. M. S. Tompkins, *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1988), Sabine Foisner, *The Redeemed Loser: Art World and Real World in William Morris*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Romantic Reassessment 101, 2 volumes (Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität, 1989), Frederick Kirchhoff, *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self 1856-1872* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990), Robert M. Cooper, *Lost on Both Sides: Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Critic and Poet* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1970), Ronnalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1972), Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1976), Joan Rees, *The poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti:*



Apart from individual critical studies, many new biographies and reprints of memoirs and diaries of the period have also recently appeared. In 1995 the complete letters of Christina Rossetti, edited by Antony H. Harrison, will be published. An up-dated version of William E. Fredeman's indispensable aid to Pre-Raphaelite scholars, *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study*,<sup>2</sup> will also soon appear. The contribution of women to the Pre-Raphaelite Movement is just beginning to be reassessed, although much recent scholarship has more relevance to art history than poetry.<sup>3</sup> As well as these monographs, the many seminal articles which have been published in the journals *Victorian Poetry*, *Victorian Newsletter*, *Victorian Studies*, *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies* and elsewhere, mark a very significant increase in critical esteem for the Pre-Raphaelite poets.

One of the most important single publications has been the gradual appearance of R. W. Crump's three volume Variorum Edition of the poems of Christina Rossetti (1979-90).<sup>4</sup> There is still, however, no complete new edition of the poems of William Morris, D. G. Rossetti, or A. C. Swinburne.<sup>5</sup> Although articles on D. G. Rossetti once proliferated

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*modes of self-expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), David. G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), and Antony H. Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> William E. Fredeman, *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Bibliocritical Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Lynne Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* (London: Virago Press, 1989), Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) and Jan Marsh's many works of art history and biography which focus on Pre-Raphaelite women.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 volumes (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1979-90). All subsequent references to this edition will be indicated by volume and page number parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> The standard texts are as follows: William Morris, *The Complete Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 volumes (London: Longmans, Green, 1910-15); D. G. Rossetti, *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. with Preface and Notes by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1911); A. C. Swinburne, *The Collected Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Sir Edmund Gosse & Thomas J. Wise, 20 volumes, The Bonchurch Edition (London: Heineman, 1925-27).

in journals, comparatively few articles or monograph studies of his poetry have appeared since the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Christina Rossetti and William Morris are now yielding more new critical studies than D. G. Rossetti, perhaps this is a symptom of the fact that they are now outranking him in critical opinion. Once heralded as 'The Jael who led our host to victory', Christina Rossetti is now the most fashionable of the Pre-Raphaelite poets.

The time is ripe for both new editions of the works of the Pre-Raphaelite poets and re-evaluations of their works— one will assist the other. It is time, too, to work towards a new definition of 'Pre-Raphaelite poetry', since it is a concept which has never been adequately defined.

Few have attempted to define literary Pre-Raphaelitism, and none have succeeded. Nearly thirty years ago, James D. Merritt attempted to divine the nature of Pre-Raphaelite poetry by defining the essential traits of the Pre-Raphaelite poem:

1. A heavy use of descriptive detail.
2. Images that tend to be highly sensuous and full of color.
3. The occasional use of an obscure symbolism, such as repeated use of the number seven, and references to the more mysterious aspects of Christianity or of "pagan" religions.
4. A tendency to lend the tone (if not the form) of a ballad to the narrative.
5. The frequent use of subjects that have an innate poignancy or morbidity. Many of these subjects were taken from literary sources.
6. Deliberate "medievalism," such as the use of vaguely medieval-sounding words, or the use of setting that, though unidentified, seem pre-Renaissance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Although a variorum edition of the works of D. G. Rossetti has not yet been produced, new research on the works of D. G. Rossetti will be aided by the developing archive. At the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities Jerome McGann is currently compiling 'The Rossetti Archive', a hypermedia project for studying the works of D. G. Rossetti.

Those who are electronically inclined and have access to the Internet's World Wide Web resource can explore the archive by using web browser software such as NCSA Mosaic or NetScape.

Address: <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/rossetti.html>.

<sup>7</sup> James D. Merritt ed. *The Pre-Raphaelite Poem* (New York: Dutton, 1966), p. 10.

Most of these characteristics apply equally well to Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (the seed from which Pre-Raphaelite poetry sprang, according to a comment attributed to William Morris), Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' and Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven', as well as Christina Rossetti's 'Maiden Song', William Morris's 'Golden Wings' and D. G. Rossetti's 'The Blessed Damozel'.

Merritt's list is clearly deficient. It is highly selective and highly superficial. The principal texts of the first four chapters of this thesis, the elegies, selected lyrics, and epic tales, rarely, if at all, conform to the Pre-Raphaelite 'recipe' provided by Merritt. Only the last chapter, which deals with sexuality in ballads, focuses on the type of poem which Merritt designates 'Pre-Raphaelite'. Nonetheless, this thesis deals with 'Pre-Raphaelite' poetry. Merritt outlines only the most obvious, surface traits of literary Pre-Raphaelitism, neglecting to allow for the development of more diffuse forms of Pre-Raphaelitism which exhibit themselves in the thematic concerns of the Pre-Raphaelite poets which will be examined in this thesis.

Another early commentator, Cecil Y. Lang, rejected Merritt's formula-like definition of the term 'Pre-Raphaelite poetry'. Lang commented thus:

If the term *Pre-Raphaelite* refers, as it usually does, to poetry written by the Pre-Raphaelites, their associates and disciples, it has a certain utility in literary history but does not belong to criticism. If it refers to poetry written by Rossetti, of whatever kind, late love sonnets as well as early poems in *The Germ* and *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, its historical value diminishes as its critical significance increases. If, however, it is to be used as a strictly critical term, it has to mean something like "visualized poetry of fantasy" or "fantasy crossed with realism."<sup>8</sup>

Lang's attempt at defining literary Pre-Raphaelitism gets us only a little further than Merritt's since this definition excludes:

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<sup>8</sup> Cecil Y. Lang, *The Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. xxvi.

. . . nearly all the poetry of Christina Rossetti . . . though "Goblin Market" might be said to qualify, all the poetry of William Morris after *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), and, to some extent, most of the poetry of Rossetti after the fifties, except a quartet of late narratives. In short, though the definition is nearly self-annihilating, so it must be if it is to serve any useful critical function.<sup>9</sup>

Lang, for his practical purposes, then abandoned the definition with which he had saddled himself. He has furnished us with the most comprehensive anthology of Pre-Raphaelite writings yet produced which includes much poetry which according to his strict definition cannot be called Pre-Raphaelite, such as *Monna Innominata*, *The House of Life*, and *Atalanta in Calydon*. In practice he does away with the 'nearly self-annihilating' definition which he has invented, so how can we take it seriously?

Some critics of recent years who have made assessments of the work of the poets with whom I am concerned have been reluctant to label these poets 'Pre-Raphaelite'. In regard to both his poetry and his painting D. G. Rossetti has most often been called a Pre-Raphaelite since he more than any other person invented Pre-Raphaelitism. In Kent's collection of essays on Christina Rossetti, however, only one of the commentators deals with her as a Pre-Raphaelite.<sup>10</sup> Christina Rossetti's familial connections with members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and her contributions to *The Germ* earned her the title 'Pre-Raphaelite' but revaluations of her poetry, particularly feminist critiques, have tended to view her work in isolation from the male 'Pre-Raphaelites'. Yet Christina Rossetti did not work in isolation and a study of her poetry in comparison with that of William Morris and D. G. Rossetti enriches our understanding of their works just as it firmly locates her as not only one of the most important of the Pre-Raphaelite poets, but as one of the great Victorian poets.

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<sup>9</sup> Lang, p. xxvii.

<sup>10</sup> See Jerome Bump, 'Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood', in Kent ed. *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, pp. 322-45.

William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) is often called a 'Pre-Raphaelite' volume. His mature work, the epic *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), is less often perceived as Pre-Raphaelite. This is a mistake: Morris's conception of sexual love and his view of women demonstrated in *The Earthly Paradise* and his personal lyrics owe much to his Pre-Raphaelite influences. Swinburne's early *Poems and Ballads* (1860) is regarded as 'Pre-Raphaelite', but his later work has more affinity with that of the 'decadent' poets of the *fin de siècle*. Swinburne is therefore a Pre-Raphaelite poet in only a marginal sense. For this reason, this present study deals with only one of his works, namely his *Tristram of Lyonesse* which I find interesting for its display of a distinctly Pre-Raphaelite sensibility.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a short-lived phenomenon. Founded in late 1848, by 1853 the individual members had dispersed in order to pursue quite different aesthetic paths. Yet Pre-Raphaelitism did not die with the P.R.B.: in 1856 it underwent a renaissance at Oxford with the regrouping of D. G. Rossetti, William Morris, A. C. Swinburne and Edward [Burne] Jones, and later diffused itself through the writings of D. G. Rossetti, William Morris, Christina Rossetti, and A. C. Swinburne. This is not to say that D. G. Rossetti was the 'onlie begetter' of literary Pre-Raphaelitism, or that the other poets followed his example in everything. Christina Rossetti wrote poetry from her earliest years: she was a dedicated poet who resisted many of her brother D. G. Rossetti's attempts to modify her work. Swinburne, in his Oxford and immediately post-Oxford years, was a devotee of the poetry of William Morris rather than D. G. Rossetti, and was later influenced by the Jacobean dramatists and the French decadents amongst others. D. G. Rossetti fired Morris with the desire to write poetry but even Morris's earliest productions were very individualistic. Nevertheless these four poets have long been bracketed together and I am continuing, with some reservations, to group them under the banner 'Pre-Raphaelite'.

For some years the work in progress which became this thesis was entitled 'The Articulate Heart: A Study of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry of Love'. On rethinking the nature of Pre-Raphaelitism and the concerns of this thesis I retitled the work, putting a little distance between the three

principal poets and the term 'Pre-Raphaelite', yet I will still refer to them as Pre-Raphaelites. I have two main justifications for this, the first is an historical one. Through their familial ties, friendships and commonality of literary interests these poets were called Pre-Raphaelites. Secondly, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, although the early, florid type of Pre-Raphaelitism commented upon by Merritt had only a short life span, certain more elusive but much longer lasting Pre-Raphaelite approaches to the mechanics of poetry were sustained throughout the writing lives of the poets on whom my discussion will focus. Most importantly, I have bracketed these poets together under the title 'Pre-Raphaelite' since their works evince a very strong thematic unity, a unity which evidences itself more than anywhere else in their approaches to the writing of love poetry and poetry about love.

For over a century an interest in the lives and love affairs of the principal Pre-Raphaelite poets has overshadowed appraisal of their work. This study will not engage in a discussion of the lives of the poets concerned except on those occasions when biographical information is directly relevant to the text. However, there *are* occasions when the discussion of biographical information is essential. Some of the love poems with which I will deal are illuminated by knowledge of the poet's life. I see my inclusion of such information as historical responsiveness rather than the parading of prurient curiosity. What I will try to avoid is a journalistic interest in the love affairs for their own sakes.

Biographers and critics have long searched for the love affairs which will 'explain' the poems. The late Lona Mosk Packer distorted an otherwise very good biography of Christina Rossetti by including speculations based on very flimsy evidence that the peripheral Pre-Raphaelite William Bell Scott was the inspiration for most of Christina Rossetti's love poetry including the English sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata* and the Italian lyric sequence *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente*.<sup>11</sup> More

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<sup>11</sup> See Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963). In fairness to Packer it should be pointed out that the newest Rossetti biography, Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), although in many ways a valuable treatment of Rossetti's life and work, is marred by Marsh's untenable hypothesis that Rossetti was sexually abused by her father.

recent biographers have somewhat reluctantly accepted that the somnolent James Collinson and the shabby but charming Charles Bagot Cayley were her acknowledged loves.<sup>12</sup> The 'love triangle' of Jane Morris, D. G. Rossetti, and William Morris is thought to appear in many guises in Morris's writings, particularly the triangular configuration of Gudrun/Kiartan/Bodli in *The Lovers of Gudrun*, but as I will show, Morris, more than the other Pre-Raphaelites, strove to thwart biographical readings<sup>13</sup>. D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*, when read with recourse to biographical matters becomes, in part, the story of the replacement of his 'old love', Elizabeth Siddall<sup>14</sup>, with his 'new love', Jane Morris, but this type of reading distracts us from discovering the real subjects of the sequence.<sup>15</sup> As stated, these searches must now end: a more dashing suitor for Christina Rossetti than Charles Bagot Cayley is unlikely to materialise; those who hoped for revelations with the publication of D. G.

<sup>12</sup> See Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* (London: Constable, 1981), Kathleen Jones, *Learning Not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti* (Gloucestershire: The Windrush Press, 1991) and Frances Thomas, *Christina Rossetti* (Worcestershire: The Self Publishing Association, 1992). The Centennial of Christina Rossetti 1830-1894 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, 32 (1994), ed. Antony H. Harrison, contains an article on the scholarly relationship between Rossetti and Bagot Cayley which includes newly discovered photographs of Cayley. See Kamilla Denman and Sarah Smith, 'Christina Rossetti's Copy of C. B. Cayley's *Divine Comedy*', pp. 315-338.

<sup>13</sup> For information on Morris's emotional life, aside from the very circumspect J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 volumes (London: Longmans, 1899), see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd ed. (1955; New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), Phillip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Works and Friends* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), and Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994). Also see Oscar Maurer, 'William Morris and the *Laxdæla Saga*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 5 (1963), pp. 435-37 for an identification of Gudrun/Kiartan/Bodli with Jane Morris/D. G. Rossetti/William Morris.

<sup>14</sup> In accordance with recent feminist opinion, put forward by Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, pp. 93-6 and *passim*, I will spell the surname of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall as 'Siddall', the spelling used by her family, rather than 'Siddal', a gentrification of the name which D. G. Rossetti constructed. The editors of *Poems and Drawings by Elizabeth Siddal* (London: The Wombat Press, 1978), Roger C. Lewis and Mark Samuels Lasner, spell the name 'Siddal' in the title of their edition, but refer to the woman as 'Siddall'.

<sup>15</sup> Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Frederick Muller, 1949) contains a biographical reading of *The House of Life* as does C. M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

Rossetti's letters to Jane Morris have been a little disappointed,<sup>16</sup> and both Morris and Swinburne were very reticent about their private lives. We may never discover more than we know now about the love affairs of the Pre-Raphaelite poets.<sup>17</sup>

General discussions of the Pre-Raphaelites comment on love poetry, but often in clichéd language: critics constantly note that The Blessed Damozel has a warm bosom and that Christina Rossetti renounced earthly love for the hope of heaven. A few of the most recent monograph studies of the Pre-Raphaelites have examined love poetry in some detail: these include the studies of Christina Rossetti by both Rosenblum and Harrison and the studies of William Morris by both Silver and Foisner, as well as Harrison's study of Swinburne. These studies differ from mine in both focus and method. Love is generally held to be D. G. Rossetti's principal theme but specific, detailed examinations of his love poetry are rare. Stephen J. Spector's 1971 article and Florence Saunders Boos's 1972 monograph still rank amongst the best discussions of D. G. Rossetti's love poetry. D. G. Rossetti's poetry has too often suffered from the 'coffee-table' book attitude which treats his love poems as mere adjuncts to his paintings of languorous *femmes*.

Despite much current critical interest in the Pre-Raphaelites and poets of the Victorian age in general, it is difficult to find either monographs or articles which exclusively treat love poetry in the Victorian age. Rod Edmond's *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian poetry and domestic narrative* (1988) treads much of the same terrain as Patricia Ball's

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<sup>16</sup> In 1876, at the behest of Jane Morris Rossetti drew up instructions that all of Jane's letters to him should be burnt immediately upon his death. This appears to have been done. Similarly, no letters written between 1870 and 1877 from D. G. Rossetti to Jane Morris survive, see Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1828-1938* (London: Pandora, 1986), p. 131. At her request the remaining letters of D. G. Rossetti to Jane Morris were sealed for fifty years following her death. These were finally published in 1976, see *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence*, ed. John Bryson in association with Janet Camp Troxell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). Although very loving, these letters are not overtly sexual in tone.

<sup>17</sup> Unless new material becomes available. For example, I regret that I am unable to consult Antony H. Harrison's *The Collected Letters of Christina Rossetti* which will be published by the University of Virginia Press in 1995.



*The Heart's Events: The Victorian Poetry of Relationships* (1976).<sup>18</sup> Both critics treat Clough, Patmore, and Meredith, dealing with verse-novels rather than lyric sequences. Edmond includes an interesting chapter on *Goblin Market* whilst Ball entirely neglects the Pre-Raphaelites. Twenty years ago Isobel Armstrong published a brief but penetrating survey of the Victorian poetry of sexual love which unfortunately neglected the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>19</sup> The most recent studies of love poetry in the Victorian period are Antony H. Harrison's *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry* (1988) and Glennis Stephenson's *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (1989).<sup>20</sup>

Love has thus long been neglected as a subject for criticism in Pre-Raphaelite love poetry. This present study is intended to go some way towards redressing this situation by treating love in both lyrics and narrative poems. The breadth of my treatment of the three poets will vary as it is not the intention of this study to give an overall assessment of the *oeuvre* of each poet. Here I will concentrate only on that poetry which best illuminates our understanding of each poet's treatment of sexual love.

This study concerns two main types of love poetry: the first-person lyric love poem aptly, if naïvely, titled by Geoffrey Grigson 'in-Love poetry',<sup>21</sup> and narrative poetry written in the third person which describes the relationship of lovers. Accordingly, this thesis is divided into two broad categories: 'Elegies' (those 'in-love' sequences of poems in which an 'I' addressing the silent beloved or 'You', bemoans the death of love), and 'Narratives' (third-person poetry written as either romance,

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<sup>18</sup> See Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian poetry and domestic narrative* (London: Routledge, 1988) and Patricia M. Ball, *The Heart's Events: The Victorian Poetry of Relationships* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1976).

<sup>19</sup> See Isobel Armstrong, 'Browning and the Victorian Poetry of Sexual Love', in *Writers and their Background: Robert Browning*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: George Bell, 1974), pp. 267-298.

<sup>20</sup> Glennis Stephenson, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love* (London: Ann Arbor, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Grigson ed. 'Introduction', in *The Faber Book of Love Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973) p. 11.

epic, or ballad, in which the characters of those who are in love are observed through their words and actions). These two categories embrace a great deal of the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites, yet surprisingly little sustained critical attention has been paid to their love poetry.

I will begin this study with an examination of the lyric sequences of Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti which I have called 'Elegies'. The best, most potent Pre-Raphaelite love poetry is uttered by a speaker in isolation from the beloved. These poems are addressed to an unnamed 'you', but this person is always silent and we learn very little about him or her. The Pre-Raphaelites are the love poets of the isolated self who exalt love while at the same time decrying the fact that they have lost or must lose it.

In 1965 W. E. Fredeman dubbed *The House of Life* an elegiac sequence, comparing it with Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Fredeman regarded *The House of Life* as elegiac in the sense that in this poem Rossetti mourned his whole life. My conception of elegy is quite different. There have been many lyric poems about love, and many poems about the death of a loved one. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* may be the supreme example of the first type of poetry, whilst King's *Exchequy* and Milton's *Lycidas* are prime examples of the latter kind; but the elegising of love itself is a habit peculiar to the Pre-Raphaelite poets.

The elegies which will be examined in the first three chapters of this thesis are quite dissimilar in scope and length. Morris's twelve short poems from *The Earthly Paradise* exist at the blurring edge between pastoral poem and love lyric, and his personal poems (scattered throughout various volumes of his works, some of them deliberately withheld from publication in his lifetime) are fragmentary and 'reluctant' love poems. Christina Rossetti's profoundly reticent 'It' poems refuse to name their subject, whilst her *Monna Innominata* sequence defines and redefines the love lyric, and her short sequence 'By Way of Remembrance' (an elliptical personal utterance) may be compared with that work and with her sequence of Italian poems named *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente*. D. G. Rossetti's 101 *House of Life* sonnets range back and forth across erotic, quasi-spiritual and philosophical themes, but as a mass they may be regarded as one enormous love poem which attempts to find

meaning in life through love and meaning in love through the poetic act.

All of the elegies sing the song of the death of love while at the same time affirming sexual love as the highest value in life. Each sequence is a pilgrimage of the soul which examines the love poet as both singer of the elegy to love and as lover. While love must inevitably be lost, the three poets find succour in the act of poetry. Poetry is 'Love's Last Gift' and love's last hope; poetry makes real the experience lost to the speaker of the poem as the love poem is perpetual but love and life are mutable and transient. As Florence Boos writes:

One loves because one's physical being and that of others will be annihilated; love is partially a rebellion against time, partially a shared mourning of the futility of rebellion.<sup>22</sup>

One writes love poetry 'because one's physical being and that of others will be annihilated' and along with that physical being love itself will end. In some ways Pre-Raphaelite love poetry memorialises sexual love just as Shakespeare's sonnets of praise immortalised the young man: 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee' (18); but Pre-Raphaelite love poetry does more than simply memorialise. The love poetry becomes in itself a substitute for a sexual relationship in which the poet-lovers exercise the ability to possess and control in discourse the very relationships which they have been unable to control in experience.

In the absence of a lover and a successful love relationship Pre-Raphaelite love poetry often deals with the word 'love' as a signifier of the gap between existential human desire and its fulfillment. 'Love' may be a metaphor for many things. As Boos points out in relation to the poetry of D. G. Rossetti:

"Love" in Rossetti [sic], as in almost all nineteenth-century poets, is a metaphor for all that is best and most concentrated in life— memory, sensuousness, idealism, the aesthetic and the

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<sup>22</sup> Florence S. Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 41.

intense.<sup>23</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelite poets try to fill the gap resulting from the loss of love by recuperating the experience in words. The narrative of Pre-Raphaelite love poetry is essentially repetitive: the story of loss is rehearsed over and over again so that the speaker can experience the 'repetition as the movement from passivity to mastery'.<sup>24</sup> The silences in Pre-Raphaelite poetry are frequently 'speaking silences' filled with the implications of words not said, words which cannot be said because they contravene religious, social, or self-imposed boundaries, or because the magnitude of the experience whether this is called 'love', or 'pain' or 'desire' transcends any possible signifier. Silence can mean total withdrawal:

So far as he is serious, the artist is continually tempted to sever the dialogue he has with an audience. Silence is the furthest extension of that reluctance to communicate, that ambivalence about making contact with an audience . . . Silence is the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture, by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world.<sup>25</sup>

Or it can offer a new means of communication: silences and gaps embedded within the discourse of poetry can signify the moment of pausing on the edge of transgressing boundaries—that is, they mark a temporary withdrawal. By deploying these silences and gaps the Pre-Raphaelite poet marks out the boundaries of possibility around the discourse of love, producing a sense of the passion and tension of a boundless force (love) which is always restricted and bound within limits. These constraints are perhaps most powerfully felt in the poetry of Christina Rossetti whose life was circumscribed by many boundaries which her poems about silence and confession explore and explode. This self-portrait from the sonnet 'On progress' could stand as a metaphor for

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<sup>23</sup> Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot,' *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977), p. 286.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1966), p. 6.

the conflict between silence and confession in Rossetti's poetry and life:

Slow-speaking when she has some fact to tell,  
Silent with long-unbroken silences,  
Centred in self yet not unpleased to please,  
Gravely monotonous like a passing bell.  
Mindful of drudging daily common things,  
Patient at pastime, patient at her work,  
Wearied perhaps but strenuous certainly.  
Sometimes I fancy we may one day see  
Her head shoot forth seven stars from where they lurk  
And her eyes lightnings and her shoulders wings.

## Part One: Elegies

### Love's Last Gift is Poetry

All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love  
To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang;  
But Autumn stops to listen, with some pang  
From those worse things the wind is moaning of.  
Only this laurel dreads no winter days:  
Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise.

— D. G. Rossetti

I sometimes hold it half a sin  
To put in words the grief I feel:  
For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
A use in measured language lies;  
The sad mechanic exercise,  
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er.  
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:  
But that large grief which these enfold  
Is given in outline and no more.

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson

'With other names do we name pain,  
The long years wear our hearts in vain . . .  
Full silent wayfarers we are . . .'

— William Morris

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts.

— Percy Bysshe Shelley

# Chapter One

## Silence & Confession

### The Poetry of Christina Rossetti

#### I: Silence

##### The 'It' poems

' "But," says my friend, "what was this thing and where?" '



SILENCE and confession reign in the love poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites in terms of the choice to publish poems or leave them unpublished, as well as in the vacillation between keeping quiet, or telling, in the poems themselves. The only way to be certain of taking your poems to the grave is to burn them, for as Pre-Raphaelite legend tells, the grave is wont to yield up poems. Christina Rossetti left her Italian love lyrics locked in a drawer. William Morris left love poems unpublished. William Michael Rossetti and May Morris intervened and published these poems but William Michael Rossetti published his sister's *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* as she had written it, in Italian, and May Morris did not publish all of her father's personal poems.

Several of the lyric sequences to be addressed in this thesis were 'hidden' by either the poet or the poet's editor. One way of 'hiding' a text is by burying it within a bulk of material. Christina Rossetti's 'By Way of Remembrance' lyrics, unpublished in her lifetime, are hidden in an obscure part of the posthumously published *Poetical Works*. Likewise, William Morris hid his short 'Seasonal Lyrics' within the voluminous pages of *The Earthly Paradise*. Another way of 'hiding' material which the author might deem personal is to mask its nature: Christina Rossetti does this with her 'It' poems which play with the concept of love poetry, while Morris does this with his 'Seasonal Lyrics' in which the subject of the poems is elusive. Similarly, Christina Rossetti and D. G. Rossetti's sonnet sequences *Monna Innominata* and *The House of Life* profess frankness but are ultimately evasive.

In 1987 W. David Shaw identified Christina Rossetti as a 'Poet of Mystery' who employs a 'theology of reserve' in order to 'keep her private meanings hidden from all but understanding readers'.<sup>1</sup> Shaw focuses his

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<sup>1</sup> W. David Shaw, 'Poet of Mystery: The Art of Christina Rossetti', in Kent, p. 24.

discussion of Rossetti's 'mystery' largely by reference to her devotional poems. He briefly discusses the compounded mysteries of 'Winter: My Secret' but his discussion stops there. He does not go on to discuss a number of equally mysterious poems which I will examine in this chapter under the title 'The "It" Poems'.

In some of Rossetti's most remarkable poems mysteries and riddles abound; these include the linked lyrics 'Memory' and 'Three Stages', the mystical 'From House to Home', the curiously reticent 'May', and the intriguing 'Autumn', as well as a number of other poems.<sup>2</sup> I have called these poems the 'It' poems because of their deliberate reluctance to denote their subject by name. The poems substitute 'it' where the reader might expect to read words like 'love' or 'hope'. The 'It' poems thus play with the conventions of love poetry, seducing, perplexing, and ultimately educating the reader. A careless reader may think that they have read a love poem, even think that the word 'love' was mentioned in the poem, only to find that the poem has eluded them. The 'It' poem will trick the reader into projecting their own prejudices about what constitutes love poetry on to the seductively limpid surface of the poem. In the century since her death and during her lifetime, Rossetti's work has often been damned with faint praise for its 'purity' and 'simplicity'. The 'It' poems detonate this myth.

Rossetti wrote a great number of poems which may be called love poems (whether secular or divine). A large number of these trace the movement from a craving for earthly love to a reliance on the saving powers of divine love. Some of Rossetti's most important poems about love, notably 'Memory' and 'Three Stages', do not mention the word 'love' at all; instead they are preoccupied with the nameless 'It' which causes suffering and must be renounced. A number of questions vital to an understanding of Rossetti's love poetry centre upon the 'It' poems. For example, how do the 'It' poems which *seem* to treat love relate to the

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<sup>2</sup> Such as 'One Day', 'Fata Morgana', 'What?', 'Mirage', 'Shut Out', 'Amen', 'What Would I Give?' and 'Cobwebs'. All subsequent references to the poems of Christina Rossetti are to *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.



poems which *specify* love as their subject, referring to it by name such as 'Echo', 'A Birthday' and the masterpiece, *Monna Innominata*? Does Rossetti's corpus show a coherent view of love? Does the warring tug between secrecy and confession mar or strengthen the poetry of renunciation which she presents to us?

Rossetti's 'It' poems provoke difficulties because it is tempting to view them as personal, even biographical offerings. The biographical fallacy need not detain us, yet the nature of the speaking voice in the 'It' poems does have a peculiarly personal quality which needs to be addressed. The poems issue from a static enclosed world inhabited by the speaker, a solitary female 'I' who scarcely ever addresses herself to a 'you'. The poems contain dialogue, but it is a dialogue with self which we, the readers, overhear. The speakers of these poems confess but keep from us most of the details of what has caused the emotions which they confess. Like Morris's lyric singer in *The Seasonal Lyrics* and the *Fugitive Lyrics*, Rossetti's singers keep the integrity of their experiences to themselves and thereby keep their private meanings hidden. Rossetti's poems have a persuasiveness and 'sincerity' which is akin to the simultaneous directness and inscrutability of the diary entries of someone who writes with no thought of a reader other than her or himself. The poems seem personal in that knowledge is assumed, and the speaker need not detail the where and when of events which triggered emotional reactions since these are known to the self. Rossetti's poetry is certainly reserved, but it is also confessional in an odd way quite unlike the 'confessionality' of modern confessional poets like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath. Rossetti's poems communicate through what they omit, rather than what they tell. The searing honesty and directness of tone in 'Memory', for example, is gained through the muffled articulation of subject. These poems confess suffering in stark, moving language, but mask the subject of that suffering in order to protect the privacy of the confessor.

The inextricable mix of secrecy and confession is evident in the opening stanza of 'Memory I':

I nursed it in my bosom while it lived,  
I hid it in my heart when it was dead;  
In joy I sat alone, even so I grieved

Alone and nothing said.  
(I, p. 147)

What is the subject of this poem? After a cursory reading the most likely answer a reader might give is 'love', or perhaps 'hope', but as Jerome McGann points out:

"Love" seems the most obvious answer to the riddle, but "love" as an answer is only a word; and if we seek to flesh out that word, to "world" it with Rossetti's life and even perhaps with one or another of her putative lost loves, we will find the poem escaping us.<sup>3</sup>

McGann goes on to suggest that the subject described in 'Memory' is 'the speaking I's lost Self'.<sup>4</sup> This view is very like the one taken by Dolores Rosenblum. In her study of Rossetti, Rosenblum traces a process in Rossetti's poetry in which the poet makes 'stylized gestures of renunciation that both protest her predicament and articulate an adaptive myth of self . . .'.<sup>5</sup> Rather than approximating the 'it' of 'Memory' to love, Rosenblum claims that the

"It" can be neither integrated nor shaken off: the "I" has to discover a way to deal with the "it" that both "once was" and "still is". Thus, the "it" is a self which must be denied and put aside.<sup>6</sup>

Rosenblum, like McGann, believes that:

'A reading that equates "it" with a human love and a specific biographical circumstance [in Rossetti's life] does not really account for the details of the poem'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome McGann, 'Introduction', in Kent, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome McGann, 'Introduction', p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenblum, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenblum, p. 196.

[my interpolation]

In a broad sense this is true, but Rosenblum and McGann need to separate human love from a particular human love of Rossetti's and specific biographical events. As critics of the last few decades have constantly reiterated, we must steer away from biography-based interpretations of Rossetti's poems because sometimes a biographical reading precludes a close textual reading, and the circumstances of Rossetti's love affairs do not always 'fit' the pattern of renunciation in her poetry. As Georgina Battiscombe points out, Rossetti wrote poems about the inevitable failure of love years before she met her presumed first suitor, James Collinson.<sup>8</sup> This may have been because 'maudlin melodies' were very fashionable amongst the 'poetesses' practising in Rossetti's youth such as L. E. L. In any case, Rossetti must be given some credit for poetic invention. For example, that aberrantly happy poem, 'A Birthday', cannot be accounted for by the known circumstances of her life at the time unless we succumb to Marsh's new hypothesis that Rossetti was a little in love with the painter John Brett.<sup>9</sup>

What of Rosenblum and McGann's claims that human love cannot satisfy all the demands of the 'it' of 'Memory'? McGann's quibble is a semantic one. He says 'love' is only a word, yet so is the mysterious 'self' which he and Rosenblum propose. I agree that the 'it' might be a 'self', but is not this self one which has its birth in love, or the hope for love which recurs in Rossetti's poetry?

There is some evidence that as well as writing deliberately enigmatic, secretive poems, Rossetti edited works in order to make them appear more enigmatic. She was anxious to shield herself from the public gaze and did not want readers to construe her works as 'love personals'.<sup>10</sup> The non-specificity of subject, in many of her poems then,

<sup>8</sup> Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> See Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> See Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 207. Also see Crump's textual notes which demonstrate how Rossetti pared down many of her poems, sometimes, but not always, on

may be due to this very desire to avoid being understood in any conventional way.

'Memory' may be illuminated by comparison with 'From House to Home'. In both poems the speaker describes how she has felt compelled to smash apart, then renounce the thing she cherishes most. Both speakers simultaneously confess their grief but keep silent about the source of their pain by objectifying it; projecting it outward so that it becomes an entity outside the self which takes on many varying guises. In 'From House to Home' the speaker cherishes a 'dream', a world of illusion or 'house of lies', a marvellous glass mansion of the soul. In 'Memory' the speaker alternatively cherishes a doll or infant-like creature, 'the naked truth', an idol or totem, and a 'blessed' memory. But 'illusion' and 'memory' each mask something further behind them. What type of illusion has the speaker of 'From House to Home' penetrated? And what is the memory which tortures the stoical speaker of 'Memory'? The speaker of 'From House to Home' reveals more than the speaker of 'Memory' about the nature of the abstraction which she has worshipped; the chief glory of the mansion and garden of illusion is love, the sexual human love which the 'I' of the poem feels for the angel-figure who wanders there with her. Yet this love is in turn a veil; it masks something else which is not immediately revealed to us but the mysteries may be amenable to unravelling.

'Memory', 'From House to Home' and 'Three Stages' share similarly mysterious diction: particular lines act as *leitmotifs* through several poems. For example, in the second stanza of 'Memory' the speaker declares:

I shut the door to face the naked truth,  
I stood alone— I faced the truth alone,  
Stripped bare of self-regard or forms or ruth  
Till *first* and *last* were shown.  
[my italics]

This corresponds with the opening of 'From House to Home' wherein we

learn that: 'The *first* was like a dream thro' summer heat, / The *second* like a tedious numbing swoon' [my italics]. McGann states that this 'first' and 'second' are

. . . never actually located or identified in the poem. They remain cryptic words to the end and stand as signs of the poem's own portentous yet, finally, mysterious tale.<sup>11</sup>

This is not strictly true. Although these lines have a part to play in contributing to the 'mysterious' overall effect of the poem they also help explicate its meaning and introduce the central concern of the poem: the true nature of the pleasure palace which is simultaneously paradise and purgatory. The 'first' is the sweetness of the illusion, the 'second' is the pain suffered with the loss of the illusion, but the two are curiously alike. Rather than summer/winter, dream/reality, the 'two' are both warm dreams. What bearing then does the 'first' and 'second' of 'From House to Home' have on the 'first' and 'last' of 'Memory'? The 'first' and 'last' of 'Memory' are biblical. They refer to the first and last of all things which will be revealed to the soul in heaven by God who is the Alpha and Omega of existence. The 'first' and 'second' of 'From House to Home' are a little different. In this poem the speaker revels in the pleasures of illusion (the 'first'), only after great suffering ('the second') occasioned by being abandoned by her angel-lover. Discovering her mistaken trust, she puts away pleasure in earthly things. Thus the meanings of the 'first' and 'last' of the two poems seem different. However near the ending of 'From House to Home' the 'first' and 'last' are shown as they are in *Revelations*:

Then earth and heaven were rolled up like a scroll;  
Time and space, change and death, had passed away;  
Weight, number, measure, each had reached its whole;  
The day had come, that day.  
(I, p. 86)

The 'first' and 'second' of 'From House to Home', like the 'first' and 'last'

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<sup>11</sup> McGann, 'Introduction', p. 12.

of 'Memory' recall *Revelations* as do many of Rossetti's poems, since in *Revelations* she found a description of the end of earthly time to which she was greatly attracted. The speakers of 'Memory' and 'From House to Home' look forward to this end of time: the first because she believes that she may be reunited with her 'memory' or lover there, the second because she will abide there with God. Behind the veil of illusion, personified by an angel-figure in 'From House to Home', is God. The fault of the speaker is lack of faith or trust in God. She has put her faith in an illusion of her own making, her pernicious sexual desire for the angel figure, just as the speaker of 'Memory' has foolishly placed her trust in a similarly earthly and therefore unreliable and transitory thing: a self-created memory.

The description of the earthly delights of 'From House to Home' is utterly beguiling; the heaven described in the second half of the poem pales by comparison with the curious, quaint menagerie of D. G. Rossettian creatures found in the illusory garden of the first half. 'Memory' is far less fantastical in its decor than 'From House to Home'. Although, like 'From House to Home', it describes the isolated self as being trapped in a world of glass, of mirrors, of repeating selves, it is a much more sombre poem which raps out statements describing the psyche of the confessor in concrete terms without pausing for fanciful descriptions of past happiness. In 'From House to Home' we witness the fever of sexual infatuation followed by the apocalyptic collapse of the self in withdrawal from the drug of sexual desire which has much in common with Laura's hysterical gyrations on receiving the goblin fruit (the 'wormwood to her tongue') which as Lizzie's sacrificial gift saves her life in *Goblin Market*.

In 'Memory' we only see the numbness caused by renunciation, we do not share any of the joy in delusion supposedly experienced by the speaker although it is mentioned in the first stanza: 'In joy I sat alone, even so I grieved'. The joy is buried by suffering and the necessary endurance which follows suffering. The poem describes past events, past choices which continue into the present and future rather than present events. This, in part, explains the bare, cryptic nature of 'Memory' and the other 'It' poems. The circumstances that attend the choice to

renounce 'it' are not described; stripped of extraneous detail these poems solemnly trace the inevitable stages of an emotional and psychological process. If the 'it' of 'Memory' is a 'self' it self-created and betrayed by illusion or 'dream'.

'Memory', like the more conventional love lyric 'Twice', includes a weighing ritual:

I took the perfect balances and weighed;  
No shaking of my hand disturbed the poise;  
Weighed, found it wanting: not a word I said,  
But silent made my choice.  
(I, p. 148)

'Twice' concerns the weighing of the speaker's heart, first offered to an earthly lover who rejects it in a patronising way, second offered to God who will, it seems, accept and perfect the heart, but this event is cast into a future of which we and the speaker can know little. Again, the 'first' and second' occur: Rossetti's 'It' poems are often highly formal and ceremonious in patterning. The very formality of the poems helps to restrain the passion of the confessing voice. For example, the weighing of objects is a ritualised, 'scientific' act, representing a firm resolve to make a decision even if the outcome is a very painful one. Those who are in love (and therefore 'blind' and irrational, ruled by the heart and not the head) are not generally thought to make such decisions firmly and coolly but the speakers of both 'Twice' and 'Memory' steel themselves to carry out the decisive weighing ritual and are determined that they will abide by the decision of the scales. In 'Memory' the speaker critically 'weighs' an option, on her 'perfect balances'. Interestingly, she appears to weigh one thing, not two; presumably she knows the weight, or value of one thing but mistrusts the other, and in weighing it her mistrust is confirmed since she finds it 'wanting'. As I have indicated, 'weight' appears to be a metaphor for ultimate value since the scales allude to the heavenly process of weighing good and bad deeds in the human soul. Here too, literal weight is an important factor since it implies reality, gravity, substance. In conventional metaphor, illusion is light, airy, insubstantial (like the glittering palace of glass and light in 'From House

to Home'). Reality, however, is as solid as the brute, physical description of destroying the illusion in the form of breaking the illusory idol, which is then crushed and compacted in order to take up the small place set aside for it in the heart of 'Memory'.

Part II of 'Memory' has a change in tone which reflects the eight years gap between the composition of the two parts (Part I was composed in 1857, Part II in 1865). Here the subject of the poem corresponds more closely to the joint title than the subject of Part I. The original title of Part I, according to Crump's textual notes, was 'A Blank' and Part II was titled 'A Memory' (note the singular). The original title of Part I reveals the nullity of loss whereas the original title of Part II alludes to the substance of what is to follow, a something rather than a 'blank'. Part II is as strongly, yet ultimately 'mysteriously', metaphorical as Part I. The broken totem of Part I is forgotten, instead it has regrouped its disparate parts and has become a 'blessed' enthroned memory. The 'I' seems to have undone her act of wilful destruction which she perceived as necessary in the first poem. Now her resolve to break and forget all but a tiny part of the illusion of the past seems forgotten as she once again attends the memory, watching and waiting as if it were a statue about to come alive. Rosenblum discerns stone women who keep vigil in Rossetti's poetry. In this instance I see the memory as a statue-like figure rather than the woman herself.<sup>12</sup> The ending is surprising and unwarranted since it does not accord with the riddling elisions and uncompromising silences of the poem hitherto. In common with 'The Convent Threshold' and 'May', amongst other poems, the last lines of 'Memory':

I watch there with clear eyes,  
And think how it will be in Paradise  
When we're together.

indicate a hope for the future unification of lovers in a heavenly realm. Of course, this ending could mean a unification of self with a memory of the past rather than the physical meeting of lovers, but the slippery

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<sup>12</sup> Rosenblum, pp. xv-xvi.



allusiveness of the whole poem seems defeated by the bald factual nature of the conclusion. On close reading the two parts of 'Memory' do not really cohere and this is deliberate for in their disjunction they reveal the propensity of the speaker to, at least partly, fail to complete the renunciation.

'Three Stages' traces this recurrent cycle of renunciation. The three parts of the poem were respectively composed in 1848, 1849 and 1853. 'Three Stages', perhaps more typical on the whole of Rossetti's love poetry than 'Memory', stands in thematic terms midway between 'Memory' and 'From House to Home'. 'Three Stages' is more explicit than 'Memory' in elucidating the 'it', yet it is still deliberately reticent in its refusal to name the thing, self-consciously playing with the very nature of the nameless 'thing' as 'an empty name':

Sometimes I said: 'It is an empty name  
I long for; to a name why should I give  
The peace of all the days I have to live?—  
Yet gave it all the same.  
(III, p. 232)

The object in 'Part 1.— A Pause of Thought' is never specified. It is something much desired upon which a riddle of identity depends. The title of the first part indicates that the poem marks a brief respite in the chase for the unobtainable which also figures in 'Fata Morgana'; the two poems might be seen to represent the impossibility of attaining that 'it', the ultimate goal or pleasure or meaning for which human beings crave. In general terms 'Three Stages' charts the course of hopeless hope which engenders a perpetual chase for the unknowable. Love, of course, is never named, it is the enigmatic 'it'. Part 2 is intriguingly titled 'The End of the First Part', indicating that it details the way in which the chase was abandoned, or a 'part' or role given up. The imagery of this part is quite different from that of the preceding part, here the 'it' or 'thing' has become a dream: Part II opens 'My happy happy dream is finished with, / My dream in which alone I lived so long'. The speaker goes on to declare: 'I must pull down my palace that I built / Dig up the pleasure-gardens of my soul'. From this point onwards the poem takes on a striking resemblance to 'From House to Home' in the 'architecture' of the psyche

which it presents, as once again the speaker must painfully set aside a delightful illusion. At the end of the second part the speaker vows to build herself 'A shady hermitage' wherein to keep vigil until 'the last lingering chime' or the end of time (where first and last will be shown and the pain of renunciation salved). The ending of 'From House to Home' is quite different from that of 'Three Stages': once more the speaker will keep vigil, but she announces that she is waiting to join God and no mention is made of a metaphorical or literal habitation which she will occupy till death.

Part 3, which has no title, looks forward to the imagery which will be later used in 'Memory' (Part 3 was composed in 1854, the first part of 'Memory' was composed in 1857) when the speaker refers to dealing 'the death-stroke at a blow'. This concept, which appears in some other poems such as 'Introspective' is a powerful one in which the speaker parades her pride in her resilience and fortitude. However, in 'Three Stages 3' the 'death-stroke' is not dealt once and for all. The solitary speaker at first believes that she has dealt the death stroke to the nameless thing only to find that she has not; she grew careless and her resistance failed, leading to a renewal of 'full pulse of life and youth'. This weakness, this renewal of hope and interest in life, can have no fruitful outcome:

Alas I cannot build myself a nest,  
I cannot crown my head

With royal purple blossoms for the feast,  
Nor flush with laughter, nor exult with song . . .  
(III, p. 234)

At the end of the poem the circular chase of Part 1 is resumed.

'May' and 'One Day' are two 'It' poems which enjoy a special relationship; they are very similar in content and manner and both describe something which begins in spring and ends in autumn. In the latter poem we are told that a couple met in spring and parted in autumn—in 'May' the events of these months are alluded to in a more cryptic fashion. 'One Day' pretends to straightforwardly confess. This is evident in the tone of the opening line which seems uncompromisingly

frank and confiding: 'I will tell you when they met'. The opening of 'May', although similarly phrased, has a very different meaning which points to the reticence of the speaker: 'I cannot tell you how it was'. We do not know why the speaker cannot tell us all, is it that her knowledge is partial and she does not understand how things came to be? Or is it that she cannot describe to us what she lost with the coming of autumn because it is too painful for her to describe? Or is it that there are no words which can constitute a name or a signification for this experience? 'From House to Home' demonstrates a similar reticence, for here the speaker's words fail her too. Rossetti's speakers can only ever articulate numbing loss and they do this through silence: the failing of words indicates absence; there is nothing but the crudest sign 'it' which stands for the something no longer present. Joy is rarely articulated, except for in that rare exception to most rules in Rossetti's poetry, 'A Birthday'. In 'From House to Home' we are told:

*I have no words to tell what way we walked,  
What unforgotten paths now closed and sealed;  
I have no words to tell all things we talked,  
All things that he revealed:*

*This only can I tell, that hour by hour  
I waxed more feastful, lifted up and glad . . .*  
(I, pp. 83-4)  
[my italics]

The speaker continually claims that she does not know how to express something, but then partially tells what it is she has to tell, or all that she is capable of telling through a genuine lack of knowledge or lexical ability. She denies the capacity to tell fully, then says 'This only I can tell' or 'This I know'. Another explanation for the woman's inability to articulate what has been revealed to her by the angel-figure is that the information he has given her is sacred and she cannot repeat it because she is not permitted to do so. Or it could be that she lacks the ability to translate into ordinary human words the marvels of life and death to which she has been privy. The speechlessness of the religious mystic tradition is converted to a mode which conveys the inexpressive nature of secular love. The speaker continually teases—approaching the reader as if to tell

all— then abruptly retreats like the speaker of 'Winter: My Secret' who is determined to frustrate the reader by making us examine our motives as readers of poetry by refusing to tell anything, playing with the very concept of secrets and confession:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:  
Perhaps some day, who knows?  
But not to-day; it froze, and blows, and snows,  
And you're too curious: fie!  
You want to hear it? well:  
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

Or, after all, perhaps there's none . . . .  
(I, p. 47)

Crump's textual notes reveal that the manuscript text of 'One Day' is written in the first person: 'I will tell you when *we* met', 'I will tell you when *we* parted' [my italics]. Thus the similarity between 'May' and 'One Day' was originally greater than it is now. 'One Day' presumes to confess but says little. 'May' presumes to say little but is richer in buried meaning than 'One Day' because of its tone of loneliness and bereavement reliant on first-person narration and an oblique style of narrative. But how do the slight differences between the two poems change the way in which we read them? 'One Day' opens in an optimistic manner, briefly describing the 'limpid days' of early spring. At this point we might believe that the poem will go on to describe the joy of the couple's meeting and their lives together thereafter. 'May', by contrast, is ominous in tone from the very beginning. The speaker describes the month with the wistfulness of one remembering with nostalgia something long lost ('with a smile and a sigh' as one of Rossetti's poems has it): 'When May was young; ah pleasant May!' Yet the last lines of the first stanza, told in retrospect, oddly look ahead to future sorrow and loneliness: 'The last eggs had not hatched as yet, / Nor any bird foregone its mate'. In 'One Day' 'meeting birds' sing 'and build with right good will'; they embark on nest building in a positively cheerful, businesslike manner. Instead of describing birds merrily working together the speaker of 'May' sourly notes that at this time none of the birds had *yet* 'foregone' their mates. Mating birds are

one of Rossetti's most frequently used symbols of married love, yet here the birds are used to symbolise the inevitable parting of lovers instead of their joyous meeting and mating.

The second stanza of 'One Day' begins with the announcement: 'I will tell you when they parted', as casually communicated as the previous announcement which told us that we would be informed of when (rather than how) the couple met. We learn nothing of the couple or their relationship: we are merely shown a picture of the season of their meeting (springtime May), then shown another picture of the autumn in which they 'parted heavy-hearted'.

'One Day' ends fairly predictably. The possibility of a future reunion of the lovers in heaven is tentatively proposed:

When shall they meet? I cannot tell,  
Indeed, when they shall meet again,  
Except some day in Paradise:  
For this they wait, one waits in pain.  
(I, p. 133)

In Crump's edition there is a page break at this point and perhaps the poem would be improved if it ended here. After the page is turned we come to the resolution of the poem:

Beyond the sea of death love lies  
For ever, yesterday, today;  
Angels shall ask them, "Is it well?"  
And they shall answer, "yea."  
(I, p. 134)

The page break emphasises the tacked-on quality of what follows, yet in its lack of detail the poem has a universal quality. Although it is never specified by name there seems little doubt that the subject of the poem is the love between two people: they meet, they part, they hope to be together once more after death. 'One Day' also refers to the lovers' hopes of being reunited 'one day' in heaven, yet 'one day' may appropriately be used as another term for 'never' as it represents the impossibly far away tomorrow which never comes.

The peculiarities of 'May' become exaggerated in the final stanza

when the speaker announces: 'I cannot tell you what it was; / But this I know: it did but pass . . .'. 'One Day' recites the course of a love affair but the speaker of 'May' claims that she does not know precisely what it is that she has lost. The enigmatic silences of 'May' are much more powerfully expressive than the slightly more communicative tone of the voice which envisions the past and future of the lovers of 'One Day'. 'May' is a poem of only thirteen lines, and my attempt to explicate its meaning is much longer; the devices employed by Rossetti in the 'It' poems makes them much more than simple songs.

## II: Confession: *Monna Innominata*

### Introductory: Headnoting

'Had such a lady spoken for herself . . .'

The sonnet sequence, *Monna Innominata*, is Rossetti's most self-conscious love poem. I write 'poem' rather than 'poems' because Rossetti made it clear that she wished the sequence to be treated as one poem, refusing to allow individual sonnets to be printed apart from the whole.<sup>13</sup> *Monna Innominata* is a 'sonnet of sonnets': it consists of fourteen sonnets each of which may be seen to constitute a line in the larger sonnet. In the past the sequence has been respectfully admired but has received little concentrated critical attention as it has usually been regarded as veiled autobiography. William Michael Rossetti is largely responsible for this view due to his insistence that the poem is personal:

. . . it is not merely probable but certain that this 'sonnet of sonnets' was a personal utterance— an intensely personal one. The introductory prose-note . . . is a blind . . . interposed to draw off attention from the writer in her own person.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Lona Mosk Packer, ed. *The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 154-5.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, with Memoir and Notes by William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 462. Hereafter referred to as *Poetical Works*.

Lona Mosk Packer, supporting her statement by reference to William Michael Rossetti's comments, perpetuated this view:

Although in a sonnet sequence external facts do not always correspond to emotional attitudes, we may assume that the *Monna Innominata* sequence is in the main a subjective expression of emotion rather than an exercise of the literary imagination in the form of a recognized poetic convention.<sup>15</sup>

Recent critics such as William Whitla, Dolores Rosenblum, and Antony H. Harrison have not been content to take William Michael Rossetti's comments on trust and treat the poem as purely autobiographical. As Whitla points out:

... little theoretical or critical attention has been given to the ongoing problem of any love-sonnet sequence, the effort to contain the agony of the persona within a highly structured art form, and the apparent contradiction that contrast implies. The contradiction can easily be removed by a geographical appeal to a context beyond the poem, as each poetic signifier is alleged to refer univocally to a specific person in the real-life experience of the writer, for example, Christina Rossetti.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988, Antony H. Harrison remarked that none of the extant studies of *Monna Innominata* '... has presented a full exegesis of the sequence or an extensive discussion of the poem's manipulation of its literary-historical contexts.'<sup>17</sup> Since then Harrison and Whitla have each presented discussions of the sequence intended to breach this gap. Whitla's essay, for example, investigates all the contexts of Rossetti's use of epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch and analyses Rossetti's headnote. According to Whitla:

Rossetti's late-Romantic composite lyric, embodying the

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<sup>15</sup> Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 224.

<sup>16</sup> See William Whitla 'Questioning the Convention: Christina Rossetti's Sonnet Sequence *Monna Innominata*', in Kent, pp. 82-131. Also see Rosenblum, pp. 203-209, and Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, pp. 174-85.

<sup>17</sup> Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 175.

subjectivity of the poetic persona inherited from Wordsworth and his contemporaries, resists easy biographical equation with real life, and posits ambiguity and concealment of meaning as two of its chief poetic strategies.<sup>18</sup>

This 'ambiguity', and 'concealment of meaning' begin in the headnote to the sequence. Since this prose headnote is so important to the way in which *Monna Innominata* is interpreted I will reproduce it here in full:

Beatrice, immortalized by "altissimo poeta . . . cotanto amante"; Laura, celebrated by a great tho' an inferior bard,— have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness.

These heroines of world-wide fame were preceded by a bevy of unnamed ladies "donne innominate" sung by a school of less conspicuous poets; and in that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenses, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour.

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn by even a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the "Portuguese Sonnets," an inimitable "donna innominata" drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.

(II, p. 86).

In this relatively short prose preface Rossetti ventures many judgments about sequences of love poems written by her famous predecessors in the field. First, she refers to Dante and Petrarch in a circumlocutory manner by invoking them through the names of the women addressed in their poetry. The creations, Beatrice and Laura, take precedence over their unnamed creators. These women, Rossetti allows, may be 'resplendent with charms' (a token image of superficial loveliness) but she finds them lacking in meaningful attractiveness. The bracketing of 'at least, to my apprehension' reinforces rather than qualifies Rossetti's following assertion that the portraits of Beatrice and Laura lack attractiveness.

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<sup>18</sup> Whitla, p. 85.



*Monna Innominata*, as the headnote suggests, is to be imagined as the emanation of an unnamed woman, one of the many *donna innominatas* or unnamed ladies addressed by male troubadour poets. Rossetti indicates that she has set out to write a sequence of love poems which deliberately play with the conventions of traditional love poetry composed by men such as Petrarch in his *Canzone*, and Dante in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia*.<sup>19</sup> Rossetti's headnote signals that she will reverse the usual position of male poet addressing the silent female beloved; she clearly intimates that the following poems are to be imagined as issuing forth from a female poet/lover who addresses a male lover who is also a poet. In troubadour poetry the barrier between male poet and female muse is often the marriage of the woman—the marriage of the man is usually a matter of little importance. Here the nature of the barrier between the man and the woman is unclear but the differences which separate the couple seem to have their origin in religion or some other unknown source rather than the marriage of either lover.

Because of the very cautious or, in Rosenblum's phrase, 'equivocating'<sup>20</sup> nature of the headnote, it has caused some misunderstanding. In particular, the reference to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* has been open to misinterpretation. Rossetti wrote:

Or had the Great Poetess of our own day only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the "Portuguese Sonnets," an inimitable "*donna innominata*" drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.

Packer paraphrases these lines thus:

If Elizabeth Barrett Browning had had an unhappy instead of a happy love . . . she might have written genuine poetry

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<sup>19</sup> Whitla, pp. 101-2, points out that all of the epigraphs from Dante used by Rossetti in *Monna Innominata* derive from the *Commedia* rather than the seemingly more appropriate *Vita Nuova*.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenblum, p. 204.

springing from deep feeling rather than literary poetry resulting from cultivated art.<sup>21</sup>

As Whitla points out, this is an extraordinary reading, given Rossetti's extreme politeness and her admiration for both of the Brownings. Whitla's reading seems a more reasonable one:

. . . Elizabeth Barrett's writing was a mimesis of the real world; she was in the circumstances not of fiction ("fancy") but of reality ("feelings"), and her poems directly address her lover, Robert Browning. An unhappy love would have given or allowed ("invited") Elizabeth Barrett to present a mimesis of a fictive world, a fancy for the imagined situation . . . the one that Rossetti posits, and to which Rossetti can bring the craft of fancy, because she is not introducing any feeling for an unhappy circumstance of reality into her role.<sup>22</sup>

But both Packer and Whitla have misread Rossetti's comments. When the Barrett Browning passage is read in the context of the whole headnote its meaning becomes clearer. On this point Isobel Armstrong has recently made a suggestion which clarifies the issue of what Rossetti meant by 'happy':

The mysterious indirectness here (for 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' is hardly a happy poem) is to be understood by remembering that in Victorian terminology to be 'happy' was to be married. And when the euphemistic terms are reversed, to be 'unhappy' is to be a spinster. Spinsters are not free to write of sexual love or passion as the 'happy' married woman is.<sup>23</sup>

Rossetti meant no disrespect to Barrett Browning, as she made clear in her remarks on another misapprehension of her reference to *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and their author:

Surely not only what I meant to say but what I do say is, not that the Lady of those sonnets is surpassable, but that a "donna

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<sup>21</sup> Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 225.

<sup>22</sup> Whitla, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian poetry: Poetry, poetics and politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 345.

innominata" by the same hand might well have been unsurpassable. The Lady in question, as she actually stands, I was not regarding as an "innominata" at all,— because the latter type, according to the traditional figures I had in view, is surrounded by unlike circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

Realising that her sonnet sequence would inevitably be compared with Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Rossetti made an inverted compliment to Barrett Browning designed to draw attention to the biographical source of Barrett Browning's sequence and thus underline the (presumably) fictive source of her own sequence.

### *The Silent Heart's Confession*

'A silent heart whose silence loves and longs . . .'

Rather than studying the 'literary-historical' contexts of *Monna Innominata* as Harrison and Whitla have done, the object of this present inquiry is to compare the articulation of love as it occurs in the 'it' poems and the poems which state love as their subject. 'Three Stages', 'Memory' and *Monna Innominata* are three central love poems in Rossetti's canon. I have questioned the status of 'Three Stages' and 'Memory' as love poems and have found that although they deal with the psychological and emotional process of renunciation, what is renounced—the mysterious 'It'— might well be called love although it is masked by other words representing abstract concepts such as 'dream', 'illusion', 'hope', 'youth, or 'beauty'. *Monna Innominata* specifies its subject as love. From the very beginning of the sequence we are aware that unlike the interior-directed, dramatic 'It' poems, these sonnets at least pretend to be exterior-directed statements. As I commented in the preceding section of this chapter, Rossetti wrote very few poems which name love as their subject, most of her best love poems are 'It' poems. The most striking exceptions to this general rule are the fourteen poems which constitute *Monna Innominata*,

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<sup>24</sup> *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Brown, Langham & Co, 1908), p. 98.

the short lyrics 'A Birthday', 'Echo', and 'Twice', and the unpublished sequences 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente*.

'A Birthday' is conspicuous as Rossetti's only lyric which celebrates the imminent fulfillment of love. As is often noted, 'A Birthday' could be equally a celebration of the coming of earthly or divine love. Many commentators have noted the opulent, decoratively 'Pre-Raphaelite' images in the poem, particularly those of the second stanza where the more personal images— those which liken the speaker's heart to a variety of fecund, natural objects— are exchanged for a list of commands for the construction of a gaudily rigged platform fit to represent the joy the woman feels in anticipating her lover's arrival. The phrase 'My love is come to me' may signal the actual physical arrival of a lover, or it may refer to the realisation that love has come to the woman in the general sense of love being awakened in her. The early sonnets of *Monna Innominata* resemble 'A Birthday' since in these poems there is a sense of the joy of lovers' meetings, but in *Monna Innominata* joy is not unmixed with suffering since it is largely joy in remembrance rather than anticipation. In the first sonnet of the sequence the speaker looks forward to future meetings and remembers the pleasure of past meetings with her lover. Her voice is intimate, tender, and confiding:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you: —  
Or come not yet, for it is over then,  
And long it is before you come again,  
So far between my pleasures are and few.  
(II, p. 86)

The speaker describes love, both remembered and anticipated, but her state is nonetheless the same as that of the solitary women of the 'It' poems— she is alone. Furthermore, it seems that she spends much of her time alone; like a neglected mistress she continually awaits the lover who may or may not come to her. The ending of the sonnet reveals a sadness which arises from the woman looking on the happiness of her love affair as a thing of the past: 'Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang / When life was sweet because you called them sweet?' The term 'song' may mean a literal song, but it is much more likely to mean a 'song

of love', particularly the song of love which is this sequence of poems. Songs are not mentioned in 'Memory' or 'Three Stages'; these are ominous poems about silence. A lack of sound, either words or song, takes on symbolic value in Rossetti's 'It' poems. For example, in 'Introspective', the speaker is determined never to reveal the source or extent of her pain to anyone. The price of this decision is heroic, deadening silence:

Dumb I was when the ruin fell,  
Dumb I remain and will never tell;  
O my soul, I talk with thee,  
But not another the sight must see.  
(III, p. 264-5)

'If I Had Words' mourns the loss of the power to articulate the misery attendant upon a broken heart, and again in 'What Would I Give!' another stonewoman, lacking heart and tears, also lacks the release of words: 'What would I give for words, if only words would come! / But now in its misery my spirit is fallen dumb'. The sonnet 'A Triad' contrasts three women's songs of love, while in 'Mirage'—an 'It' poem—the renunciation of the song of love shatters the poet-singer's heart and renders it silent. In a gesture borrowed from *Psalms* (cxxxvii.2) she hangs up the tools of her trade:

I hang my harp upon a tree,  
A weeping willow in a lake;  
I hang my silenced harp there, wrung and snapt  
For a dream's sake.

Lie still, lie still, my breaking heart;  
My silent heart, lie still and break:  
Life, and the world, and mine own self, are changed  
For a dream's sake.  
(I, p. 56)

The poems about silence capture the stonewoman (according to Rosenblum's terminology) making her few last ritual protests before she succumbs to silence. In *Monna Innominata* we hear some of the woman's confession of love through her fourteen 'songs'. Although in the very act of confessing this woman is at times reserved she nonetheless enacts the

stages in a love relationship before the inevitable act of renunciation is performed— she may be thought of as one of the women of the 'It' poems, prior to her renunciation.

Like William Morris's Seasonal Lyrics and D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life* (to be discussed in the following chapters), *Monna Innominata* is essentially elegiac in theme since it traces the progressive loss of love. By calling Rossetti's sequence 'elegiac' I do not mean to imply that the tone of the entire sequence is one of constant lamentation over the loss of love. The *Innominata*, like many of Rossetti's women, renounces love but her decision to renounce love does not devalue love itself as the dreadfully rigid life-denying stance of the speakers of 'Three Stages' and 'Memory' tends to do. Rather, the act of renunciation made by the speaker of *Monna Innominata* is a noble, self-affirming act. The 'It' poems are, of course, 'self-affirming'. They can scarcely be anything else since nothing remains to the speaker but the self which guards its integrity closely by keeping its secrets. The ruin of joy, hope and youth with the shattering of the dream or illusion results in a numb as well as dumb speaker who seldom dares to think of the sensuous glory of what she has renounced. The 'It' poems are set 'after the event'. We witness in these poems final acts and repercussions: the death-throes of love. The beginning or middle of the story is not shown to us; all we are told is that 'it' is delusory, damaging, even poisonous to the self as it is in 'What?':

A bitter dream to wake from  
But oh how pleasant while we dream!  
A poisoned fount to take from,  
But oh how sweet the stream!  
(III, p. 215)

In *Monna Innominata* we are given details of the steps leading to the choice to renounce love. Although *Monna Innominata* has much in common with the 'It' poems, it also informs us of facets of Rossetti's conception of romantic love not revealed in those poems. Rossetti's sequence is a strange mix of the ritualistic type of language pertaining to renunciation found in the 'It' poems, and a more conventionally phrased 'confessional' kind of love poetry.

*Monna Innominata* traces the progression of a love affair through the statements and counter-statements made by the protagonist-speaker of the sequence. At times the poems imitate a dialogue or debate between the speaker and her beloved: she poses rhetorical questions supposedly asked or suggested by the silent male which she then proceeds to answer. The presence of the lover/auditor in *Monna Innominata* is even more shadowy than that of the silent listener in Morris's Seasonal Lyrics. We learn little of him but we may surmise that he too is a poet-singer, a troubadour, as the sonnets contain a few references to the man's 'art' and 'song' and the scheme of the poem set out in the headnote demands that a female poet-lover addresses a male poet. We learn a little about his attitude to religion in Sonnet 6, but this is almost all we know of him. The beloved becomes no more real than Beatrice or Laura, and unlike them he is not physically described in even a rudimentary or idealised way. In her own way Rossetti's sequence makes the beloved even more invisible and silent than a Beatrice or Laura. It is not her purpose to give flesh and voice to the imagined male recipient of these love poems. Rather she wished to write poems from the point of view of a female poet-lover, thus presenting a portrait of the woman-poet written from 'feeling'.

The first few sonnets of the sequence deal with the speaking self's experience of remembering, and to an extent savouring, love, out of the presence of the beloved. Although the absence of the beloved is mourned in a sometimes conventional fashion, the solipsistic solitariness of the speaker becomes more and more noticeable. The woman speaks in warm terms of how she cherishes the presence of her beloved, yet her lone experience of love seems more real to the reader than her descriptions of the joint experience of love. Perhaps being alone is less painful for her than enduring the repeated jolts of meeting and parting:

Howbeit, to meet you grows almost a pang  
 Because the pang of parting comes so soon;  
 My hope hangs waxing, waning like a moon  
 Between the heavenly days on which we meet . . .  
 (II, pp. 86-7)

Sonnets 2 and 3 continue an appraisal of the condition of loving in solitude. In the second sonnet the speaker refers to a traditional theme in love poetry as signalled in the epigraph from Petrarch: 'I recur to the time when I first saw thee'.<sup>25</sup> Yet Rossetti's speaker finds that she cannot remember the initial meeting with her lover. The man whom she addresses seems more a phantom than ever since even their first meeting cannot be recorded.

The experience of love enunciated in the third sonnet is very similar to that experienced by the speaker in the lyric 'Echo'. Where the Innominata in Sonnet 2 despairs at her inability to remember her first meeting with her future lover, in 'Echo' the speaker prays to dream of the memory of an old love. In 'Echo' it is difficult to discount the possibility that the love described never existed at all except in dreams—he is a 'dream lover' in the literal sense of the word who may never have had any other more tangible existence. The poem begins:

Come to me in the silence of the night;  
Come in the speaking silence of a dream;  
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright  
As sunlight on a stream,  
Come back in tears,  
O memory, hope, love of finished years.  
(I, p. 46)

Just as Sonnet 1 pleads 'Come back to me who wait and watch for you', the speaker of 'Echo' entreats 'Come back to me in dreams': she only hopes for the vivid memory of love to return to her. The 'love' of 'Echo' is angelic in feature; with his 'soft rounded cheeks' and bright eyes he seems a cherub rather than an adult male. However, the love of 'Echo' appears to be an earthly love since it is implicitly contrasted with

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<sup>25</sup> R. W. Crump publishes *Monna Innominata* without including translations of the epigraphs from Dante and Petrarch. For translations see William Michael Rossetti's 'Notes' in *Poetical Works*, pp. 462-3. Whitla points out that Christina Rossetti need not have used the same translations as her brother since she was familiar with the translations made by Charles Bagot Cayley. Whitla, pp. 98-100, reproduces both William Michael Rossetti's and Cayley's translations of the lines in question and in pp. 97-109 he examines the sources of these epigraphs.



heavenly love:

Oh dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet,  
Whose wakening *should have been in Paradise*,  
Where souls brimfull of love abide and meet . . .  
[my italics]

The last lines of the first stanza of 'Echo' are interesting in light of the persistent preoccupations of the 'It' poems: 'Come back in tears / O memory, hope, love of finished years'. As I found in my examination of the 'It' poems, the reader usually interprets 'it' as love although 'it' could also be 'hope', 'memory', or 'youth' and 'beauty'. The loss of love means the loss of hope, happiness, youth, and beauty— although memory may remain and retain with it these qualities. In Rossetti's poetry the survivor of renunciation is often cold and dead or statue-like. In 'Echo' the speaker prays that her dream of love or memory of love will actually reactivate her pulse. The spiritual invigoration of love is represented in an image of physical sharing, the interchange of pulse and breath:

Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live  
My very life again tho' cold in death.  
Come back to me in dreams that I may give  
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath . . .

The hope for union with a love or the memory of him in dreams expressed in 'Echo' is to some extent fulfilled in the third sonnet of *Monna Innominata*. In Sonnet 3 the speaker tells us that she meets her lover in dreams but it is in this sonnet that the gulf between the speaker and her beloved is first observed. Sonnets 1 and 2 celebrate the speaker's enjoyment in solitude of a reciprocated, presumably continuing, love affair. The tone of Sonnet 3 is, in contrast with the first two sonnets, dark and uncertain. The dream of union is bright and lovely but:

Thus only in a dream we are at one,  
Thus only in a dream we give and take  
The faith that maketh rich who take or give . . .  
(II, p. 87)

Does the speaker mean that the relationship is flawed since 'only in a

dream we give and take'? Or does she mean that the lovers do not literally meet except in dreams? The first two sonnets imply that the lovers meet only seldom. Any estimate of how often they meet is impossible given that according to the woman they can never be together enough to fulfill her desire for meeting. As she declares in the seventh sonnet: 'We meet so seldom, yet we surely part so often; / There's a problem for your art!' By Sonnet 3 it seems that they no longer meet, or no longer meet in perfect accord of mutual exchange. Again, as in many of Rossetti's poems, happiness is associated with dream, sleep with death. Since sleep brings dreams of union with the beloved it is preferable to waking, and therefore life: 'If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake, / To die were surely sweeter than to live'. Even the happy dream is not enough. The *Innominata* craves permanency of the happy dream vision and wishes to take this happy dreaming to its ultimate conclusion—death. In Part One of this Chapter I discussed the use of dream or illusion in the 'It' poems, finding that 'Three Stages, II' contained a particularly interesting example of the use of dream which will bear quoting again, at more length than in my previous quotations:

My happy happy dream is finished with,  
My dream in which alone I lived so long.  
My heart slept— woe is me, it wakeneth,  
Was weak— I thought it strong.

Oh weary wakening from a life-true dream!  
Oh pleasant dream from which I wake in pain!

In 'Three Stages', 'Mirage', and 'From House to Home', dream or illusion is the only happiness known to the speakers. 'It' is the world of illusion, the 'real' world is the one in which the self continues to exist after 'it' is renounced. In *Monna Innominata* love is not itself depicted as dream or illusion; indeed it is shown as a solid, eternal force, but one which cannot bring steadfast happiness to the woman. Dream is a place where love can abide as it does in 'Echo', but it does not sum the whole experience of loving.

Sonnets 4 to 7 debate various issues concerning love. In Sonnet 4 the speaker wonders if she loves her beloved the most or if he loves her

more but concludes that love cannot be measured in this way. Rossetti's conception of love is one of total immersion of respective loves in a dual love:

For verily love knows not "mine" or "thine;"  
With separate "I" and "thou" free love has done,  
For one is both and both are one in love:  
Rich love knows nought of "thine that is not mine;"  
Both have the strength and both the length thereof,  
Both of us, of the love which makes us one.  
(II, p. 88)

This sonnet and the one which immediately follows show a tremendous confidence in earthly love found nowhere else in Rossetti's poetry, except for the brief exuberant outburst of 'A Birthday'. Yet this confidence is repeatedly tested by the speaker as if she is afraid that it is misplaced. As she admits in sonnet 7: 'My heart's a coward tho' my words are brave'—these words encapsulate the contents of sonnets 4-7.

The fifth sonnet takes the form of a prayer or blessing in which the speaker calls on God to both protect and perfect her beloved. This blessing is peculiar at this juncture in the sequence as it incorporates many of the terms of a traditional farewell and we have not yet been given any indication that the lovers are about to part. The prayer: 'Make your joys many and your sorrows few, / Bless you in what you bear and what you do' is accompanied by an expression of the speaker's hopes and wishes for herself. She prays to love her lover as much as she possibly can. She prepares herself for a time of testing which begins in the next sonnet of the sequence.

Sonnet 6 continues the speaker's use of biblical language which will persist through several sonnets. Here God enters and occupies a position not unlike the third member of a love-triangle. The opening is abrupt, as if in direct reply to an attack:

Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,  
I love as you would have me God the most;  
Would lose not Him, but you must one be lost...  
(II, p. 89)

What is the substance of the man's unheard rebuke? It must be that the woman loves him too much, denying God his due. Until this point we have had no indication that the lover has any great religious conviction. Perhaps he was a non-believer but was afraid of an intense expression of devotion from a committed Christian and is accusing her of idolatry so that she will reconsider her respective loves? Lona Mosk Packer claims the lover has accused the speaker of loving God more than himself.<sup>26</sup> 'I love, as you would have me, God the most' could be interpreted as 'I love, as you believe, God the most', or, as I propose: 'I love, just as you like it, God the most'. Ironically, the speaker follows her vow in Sonnet 5 to love her earthly lover without 'stint' with the claim that if she were forced to choose she would abandon man in favour of God. Her resolution is short-lived as cunning sophistry takes over from steadfast bravery and she crafts a syllogism which will allow her to love wholeheartedly both her human lover and God. She claims that her loves are mutually dependent, thereby sanctioning her earthly love through invoking heavenly love:

Yet while I love my God the most, I deem  
That I can never love you overmuch;  
I love Him more, so let me love you too;  
Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such  
I cannot love you if I love not Him  
I cannot love Him if I love not you.

This is a very different attitude towards the respective value of divine and earthly love than that taken in most of Rossetti's poems. In 'Twice', for instance, divine love is the superior alternative taken when earthly love has proved unsatisfactory. Like many of the 'It' poems, 'Twice' turns love, or the human heart, into an object which is proffered to an earthly lover and rejected. This heart is pictured as a solid physical object vulnerable to ill-treatment. Like the idol of 'Memory' it may be broken:

As you set it down it broke—  
Broke, but I did not wince;  
I smiled at the speech you spoke,  
At your judgment that I heard:

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<sup>26</sup> Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 229.

But I have not often smiled  
Since then, nor questioned since,  
Nor cared for corn-flowers wild,  
Nor sung with the singing bird.  
(I, p. 125)

Once her heart has been broken by a man, the speaker offers her heart to God who will accept and refine and temper it in order to make it fit for heaven. The poem ends on an unsettling note which gives pause to the reader. The woman becomes a Bride of Christ. God may be a fit beneficiary for the woman's heart, one to whom she can bring all of her self, but the last line of the poem sits uneasily with what has preceded it:

All that I have I bring,  
All that I am I give,  
Smile Thou and I shall sing,  
But shall not question much.  
(II, p. 126)

The affirmation of giving echoes the Christian marriage service, but the last line jars, for it seems that offering oneself to God requires a kind of silence, that of singing the songs of others without thought or questioning. This seems too like the deadness caused by renunciation rather than a lively celebration of eternal love.

The immersion of self in God in 'Twice' is much less successfully dealt with than the passionate merging of the two imagined in one of Rossetti's greatest poems, 'The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness' ('When all the over-work of life'). This poem contains a magnificent call for fulfillment in which the speaker rejects humanity— 'I will not lean on child of man'— finding that the 'craving heart' cannot say 'enough' to anything on earth, particularly the futile attempts of man to satisfy it:

I long for one to stir my deep —  
I have had enough of help and gift —  
I long for one to search and sift  
Myself, to take myself and keep.

You scratch my surface with your pin;  
You stroke me smooth with hushing breath;—  
Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,  
Probe my quick core and sound my depth.  
You call me with a puny call,

You talk, you smile, you nothing do;  
How should I spend my heart on you,  
My heart that so outweighs you all?  
(III, p. 266)

The immensity of the self is pictured in this poem as molten metal overflowing the too-small vessels of the earth. The only possible recipient of the total gift of self is God: 'I full of Christ and Christ of me'.

Sonnet 8 presents the woman's last stand against whatever it is that threatens her love. Like Sonnet 5, this poem speaks of prayers which presage the parting of the lovers. Sonnet 7, using biblical imagery, emphasises the strength of the love between the woman and man. Continuing this biblical theme, Sonnet 8 speaks of the courageous wiles of Esther (*Esther*, iv.16). In the last few lines of the poem the speaker wishes she had Esther's courage:

If I might take my life so in my hand,  
And for my love to Love put up my prayer  
And for love's sake by Love be granted it!  
(II, p. 90)

What is the woman's prayer and to whom is it directed? Is it made to the God of the last few sonnets, or the Eros figure which appears in William Morris's lyrics and D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*? Is it a prayer for her 'love', meaning her human lover, or her 'love' itself? It may be a prayer asking for her courage to renounce love, or it may be a prayer designed to beg God that she may retain this love which seems doomed to fail. In this sonnet, as in many of the 'It' poems and 'Twice', the woman is represented as handling her own fate through the image of taking love or her heart in her hands. In 'Memory' an idol was crushed, in 'Twice' a heart is broken then offered to God. Rossetti's women make 'heart-breaking' choices but choice is always open to them; they have the power to choose their own destinies without interference from God or man.

Sonnets 9 to 14 record the psychological process by which the speaker says goodbye to love. The opening of Sonnet 9 is the first of the sonnets to bring in the theme of self-sacrifice in love. The woman finds that she must relinquish love: 'Thinking of you, and all that was, and all / That

might have been and now can never be . . . ' The note is a final one yet there are five more sonnets in the sequence in which the woman tries to ease the pain of parting by various rhetorical measures. The octave of the macrosonnet over, the sequence makes its 'turn' at Sonnet 9, the beginning of the sestet. The woman renounces love and the possibility of happy union with her beloved, yet at the same time she is sustained in the act of renouncing by the strength of her love. Here the woman's love is invested with a noble power found nowhere else in Rossetti's poetry. The Innominata declares that she is ready to withdraw and leave the man to a full life since she is 'Myself unworthy of the happier call'— a reference to the married state which she later begs him to enter if he so wishes— a state which is now denied her.

The end of Sonnet 9 speaks of 'grace', a keyword in this sonnet and the one following: 'So take I heart of grace as best I can, / Ready to spend and be spent for your sake'. Early in Sonnet 9 the woman refers to her lover's 'honoured excellence'; 'excellence' is a word frequently associated with virtue of divine origin. Thus Rossetti's speaker seems to be acknowledging that her lover is endowed with attributes marking the special favour of God. In the next sonnet 'grace' becomes the 'grace' or moral strength from God needed in order to perform a duty. With the help of this type of grace the woman is ready to sacrifice herself and her own claims to happiness for the sake of love. In Sonnet 10 'grace' again appears, on this occasion 'love' asks and gives thanks for grace. This sonnet hinges on personifications of love, faith, and hope, not unlike those employed by D. G. Rossetti in *The House of Life*. Faith 'outruns' time and death but is in turn itself outrun by love who is assisted by grace. The ending of the poem is somewhat weak in that love triumphs even over 'tired hope' which leads to an enervated, conventional appeal to 'love' being reborn after death.

After the generalised philosophising of parts of Sonnet 9 and the whole of Sonnet 10, Sonnet 11 returns to a more concrete examination of the lover's relationship and the direct, pleading tone which is the dominant note of the sequence is again heard. A new theme in the sequence, that of gossips denigrating the love of one of the partners, appears in Sonnet 11. Both Sonnet 11 and Sonnet 4 deal with measuring

the respective quality of the loves of the man and woman. In the earlier sonnet the woman points out that although she was the first to love, at one time the man loved her in a more intense, extravagant fashion than she loved him. The motifs of birds and songs are used to convey the strength of the man's love: '... your love / Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song / As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove'. Sonnet 11 speaks of parting but for once in Rossetti's poetry heavenly reunion is not countenanced: '... parting hopeless here to meet again, / Hopeless on earth, and heaven is out of view'. The speaker cannot rely on heavenly reunion, yet she goes on to demand that her lover vouch for the strength of her love on the day of Judgment. The woman counters the suggestion that she has held her love cheaply in the reminder that she and her lover knew 'Of love and parting in exceeding pain'.

Throughout the sequence the love of the woman reaches out beyond containment in the love of an individual man so that her love may live on and succour her after the end of their relationship. As she says in Sonnet 11, the claims of her love live on regardless of her lover's responses to her and they extend beyond death itself. She may 'forgo' him as the birds 'forgo' their mates in 'May', but he should not underestimate the lasting power of her love:

My love that you can make not void nor vain,  
Love that forgoes you but to claim anew  
Beyond this passage of the gate of death,  
I charge you at the Judgment make it plain  
My love of you was life and not a breath.  
(II, p. 92)

Here love becomes a ferocious, selfless force, a will or power beyond the individual.

The almost threatening tone of the end of Sonnet 11 gives way to a sweet, self-effacing dignity in Sonnet 12 which could well act as a companion-piece to Sonnet 9 which, like 12, praises the beloved and offers the self as a sacrifice to the happiness of the beloved. The speaker declares herself willing to celebrate his marriage to another if he were to find someone who pleased him more than she. We do not know if there is any such rival for the speaker's love. The poem opens: 'If there be any



one can take my place' [my italics]. The speaker says that if he can manage to find anyone lovelier or wittier than herself she recommends that he marry this paragon.

The offer is a generous one: the woman conceives of herself cheerfully weaving bridal crowns and dancing at her lover's wedding. This sonnet has some consonances with Shakespeare's Sonnet 57 ('Being your slave what should I do . . .') but has none of its implied bitterness. The gesture made by the woman seems at first a humble, conventional one but its magnificence ennobles both the speaker and the love she bears for the man. The opening of Sonnet 11 predicts that although the gossips might have their doubts about the quality of her love they will not doubt that *he* loved her. This talk of gossips seems strangely out of key with the rest of the sequence as does the talk of jealousy in Sonnet 4. The *Innominata* generally speaks in a lofty, passionate manner in which the sordid matters of enduring the talk of gossips and suffering the cruelty of jealousy seem to have no part. This unevenness is part of a general mixing of strains within the poem: the 'troubadour tone' which deals with matters common to much love poetry such as the first meeting of lovers, jealousy, and gossip, co-exists with more typically Rossettian concerns such as separation, dream-union, the necessity of loving God before man, and, of course, renunciation of this man.

Unlike the renunciation 'It' poems in which sexual love must be put away because by its very nature it is deceptive and illusory, the act of renunciation played out in *Monna Innominata* seems, at least in part, due to some real barrier of viewpoint or circumstance which separates the lovers. The highly attractive but deceptive nature of earthly love is set out in the 'It' poems through lush, colourfully sensual images of bright flowers and birds, yet *Monna Innominata* is surprisingly stark, relying largely on stern biblical imagery rather than the weird, whimsical imagery of pleasure-palace and garden found in 'From House to Home'. The 'It' poems sometimes have an erotic charge which comes from their suppressed but dangerously potent ardour; *Monna Innominata*, on the other hand, is quite unerotic yet tender and persuasive in tone.

In Sonnet 13 any real or phantom rival is forgotten as the speaker makes the ritualistic handing over of her self to God. In contrast to the

immense proverbial power of God ('Without Whose Will one lily doth not stand, / Nor sparrow fall at his appointed date . . . ') the woman sees her own love as weak and small just as she had earlier in Sonnet 9 ('For woe is me who walk so apt to fall, / So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee'). Seeing the helplessness of her love, rather than yielding up her lover to a rival she commends him to God: 'Whose love your love's capacity can fill'.

The final sonnet farewells youth, beauty, love, and this sequence of love songs sung by the Innominata. The roses and the song symbolise all that the woman has lost. All that remains to her is the silent heart:

Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?  
 The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,  
 A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;  
 The silence of a heart which sang its songs  
 While youth and beauty made a summer morn  
 Silence of love that cannot sing again.  
 (II, p. 93)

The confession of love in *Monna Innominata* is over and we are left with a silence more final than the silences of the principal 'It' poems which looked forward to reunion with love, hope, youth, and beauty, or at least a memory of these, in death. The silence of *Monna Innominata* is profound and unnerving; the 'It' poems teased, *Monna Innominata* purported to confess, but in the end it becomes more perplexing and elusive than any of the poems which ostensibly dealt with secrecy. As Whitla neatly states:

The poetic act shared by lover and beloved is dumb; the reader's critical experience, once collaborative with the speaker in sustaining ambiguities, is disorientated and silenced too. Contrary to the convention, the lady sinks once more into the anonymity of *monna innominata*, leaving her inner identity, her roles, her relationship to her beloved enduring and beguiling puzzles to the reader.<sup>27</sup>

In Part III of this chapter I explore two more 'beguiling puzzles': these are the unpublished sequences 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Il Rossegiar*

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<sup>27</sup> Whitla, pp. 130-1.

*dell' Oriente.*

### III: Confession Continued: 'Behind a Veil'

#### (i) 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Monna Innominata*

'I love you and you know it— this at least,  
This comfort is mine own in all my pain . . . '

Perhaps the most fascinating of all examples of the warring tug between silence and confession which occurs in the love poetry of Christina Rossetti is to be found in those love poems which she left unpublished during her lifetime. We cannot read the mind of the poet; we can never hope to know exactly why she chose not to publish some of her work, yet it is comparatively easy to identify many unpublished poems as inferior to the bulk of her work, being merely occasional pieces, exercises on common themes, or experiments in rhyme.<sup>28</sup> 'By Way of Remembrance', a sequence of four sonnets, is not manifestly inferior to any of Rossetti's best published work, yet it remained unpublished at her death in 1894. Both in the general and in the particular, this mini-sequence bears a very striking resemblance to *Monna Innominata*. This provokes a number of questions: Did Rossetti decide not to publish these poems because of their resemblance to the longer work? Were they a rehearsal for *Monna Innominata*? Or is the quartet even more personal than *Monna Innominata*? Did Rossetti suppress 'By Way of Remembrance' because it confessed too much in strident tones and she preferred to present to the public the smoother and more restrained facade of *Monna Innominata*?

After Christina Rossetti's death in 1894, William Michael Rossetti published a collection entitled *New Poems* (1896). Reviewing the contents of this volume he confronted earlier accusations that of Rossetti's remaining unpublished poems he had

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, those poems categorised as 'Poems for Children and Minor Verse' in *Poetical Works*.

... raked together all that I could find, however indifferent in several instances, and presented all to the public, who would gladly have dispensed with many.<sup>29</sup>

In answer, he reiterated this affirmation: 'I conceive some of the compositions herein contained to be up to the level of Christina Rossetti's best work'.<sup>30</sup> He goes on to list these poems in a footnote, making reference to both *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* and 'By way of Remembrance'.

'By Way of Remembrance' was composed in 1870.<sup>31</sup> According to William Michael Rossetti's note:

To this quartett [sic] of sonnets I find the date 1870 appended. To one of them, the third, there is (in a different MS.) the precise date '23.10.70'.<sup>32</sup>

First published in *A Pageant and other Poems* in 1881, the precise composition date of *Monna Innominata* is not known. There are many consonances between 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Monna Innominata*. Four identical lines occur in both sequences, and given that 'By Way of Remembrance' is so short and *Monna Innominata* is so obviously a mature, sophisticated work, I believe it is hardly feasible that *Monna Innominata* could have been written earlier than 'By Way of Remembrance'. Rossetti's first collection *Goblin Market and other poems* appeared in 1862, followed by *The Prince's Progress and other poems* in 1866, *Sing-Song* (a book of children's verses) in 1872 and *A Pageant and other Poems*, in which *Monna Innominata* first appeared, in 1881. In theory, *Monna Innominata* could then have been written at any time between 1866-1881 but I am convinced that it was written some time later than

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<sup>29</sup> See 'Preface', *Poetical Works*, p. vii.

<sup>30</sup> 'Preface', *Poetical Works*, p. vii.

<sup>31</sup> See Crump's editorial notes, III, pp. 485-6.

<sup>32</sup> 'Notes', *Poetical Works*, p. 487.

1870, when 'By Way of Remembrance' was written.

As I have stated, Christina Rossetti wrote very little love poetry of the direct kind. *Monna Innominata* is the only extended poem, aside from the posthumously published 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Il Rosseggia del' Oriente*, in which the speaker addresses herself to her lover and discusses their relationship. All three sequences elegise love, dealing both with the renunciation of a particular lover and the renunciation of all hopes of earthly love.

On first glance, the reader familiar with the *Monna Innominata* sequence will be struck by a number of similarities between *Monna Innominata* and 'By Way of Remembrance'. There is the obvious similarity of construction— although they are not numbered and do not have epigraphs assigned to each of them as do the *Monna Innominata* sonnets, the 'By Way of Remembrance' poems nevertheless form a sonnet sequence— the poems are joined by their title and there is a quite clear thematic progression from the first to the last sonnet. In *Monna Innominata* Rossetti devised an elaborate blind to separate herself as poet-lover from the poet-lover who enunciates the sequence; however Rossetti takes no such trouble to disavow her own identity in 'By Way of Remembrance'. Perhaps this was because she knew that the poems would not be published.

The speaking voices of the two sequences sounds very similar. Both voices exhibit a winning frankness in communicating their love, as the opening lines show:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—  
Or come not yet, for it is over then,  
And long it is before you come again,  
So far between my pleasures are and few.  
(*Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 1)

Remember, if I claim too much of you,  
I claim it of my brother and my friend:  
Have patience with me till the hidden end.  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 1, III, p. 312)

In the first few lines of *Monna Innominata* we learn that the relationship is a current one; although the lovers are separated for some reason the

woman feels that she is in a position to call him back to her. 'By Way of Remembrance' appropriately begins with the word 'Remember'. Although the relationship is intact and happy at the beginning of *Monna Innominata* we learn through the course of the sequence that the speaker will renounce her love, as she does at the end. The relationship described in 'By Way of Remembrance' is a past relationship. The act of renunciation has already been played out. This quartet, like *Monna Innominata* and *Il Rossegiar dell Oriente*, is an elegy to love, a parting gesture to the beloved, its title echoing the words attached to a funeral wreath.

Both sequences open with entreaties— each woman asks something of her beloved. The speaker of *Monna Innominata* wants his physical presence, whereas the speaker of 'By Way of Remembrance' wants him to have patience, to accept her renunciation of him. She states that she claims this from him as 'my brother and my friend', though he is clearly not either of these. The idea of 'dues' and payment is played with in this sonnet much as the idea of comparing the quality of the respective loves of the man and woman is the subject of Sonnet 4 of *Monna Innominata*:

Pay me my due; though I to pay your due  
Am all too poor and past what will can mend:  
Thus of your bounty you must give and lend  
Still unrepaid by aught I look to do.  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 1)

Which owes the other most? my love was long,  
And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong;  
I loved and guessed at you, you construed me . . .  
Nay, weights and measures do us both a wrong.  
For verily love knows not "mine" or "thine" . . .  
(*Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 4, II, p. 88)

The speaker of 'By Way of Remembrance' is sad and depleted at the very beginning of the sequence. Too 'poor' to pay the 'dues' of love on earth, she prays that her lover will meet her in heaven. Between Sonnet 1 and Sonnet 2 of 'By Way of Remembrance' there is a stronger, more immediate thematic progression than any found in *Monna Innominata*. Sonnet 1 ends with the speaker's fervent hope that her lover's generosity will be repaid 'beyond the mystic Jordan' 'When Angels singing praises in

their mirth / Have borne you in their arms and fetched you hence'.  
Following this, Sonnet 2 opens with the exclamation:

Will you be there? my yearning heart has cried:  
Ah me, my love, my love, shall I be there  
To sit down in your glory and to share  
Your gladness, glowing as a virgin bride?  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, III, p. 313)

These are probably the most unbridled ecstatic lines in Rossetti's poetry since 'A Birthday'. From this point the sonnet takes on an almost uncanny resemblance to *Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 12, but although the themes and diction of the two are almost identical, the tone of *Monna Innominata* is much more controlled.

Both sonnet 2 of 'By Way of Remembrance' and Sonnet 12 of *Monna Innominata* entertain the possibility of the man finding another woman, a more lovable and beautiful woman, to take the speaker's place. She presses upon him her willingness to accede to this should it make him happy. She will do more than merely stand aside to make way for another woman: she will joyfully celebrate his marriage. In 'By Way of Remembrance' the speaker imagines her lover making a union with another woman (or spirit?) in heaven, whilst in *Monna Innominata* she imagines the event as a purely earthly marriage:

Or will another dearer, fairer-eyed,  
Sit nigher to you in your jubilee . . .  
— Yea, if I love I will not grudge you this:  
I too shall float upon that heavenly sea  
And sing my joyful praises without ache;  
Your overflow of joy shall gladden me,  
My whole heart shall sing praises for your sake  
And find its own fulfilment in your bliss.  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 2, III, p. 313)

If there be any one can take my place  
And make me happy whom I grieve to grieve,  
Think not that I can grudge it, but believe  
I do commend you to that nobler grace,  
That readier wit than mine, that sweeter face;  
Yea, since your riches make me rich, conceive  
I too am crowned, while bridal crowns I weave,  
And thread the bridal dance with jocund pace . . .  
Your honourable freedom makes me free,  
And you companioned I am not alone.  
(*Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 12, II, p. 92)

The sentiments are the same. Words and phrases are also replicated: '— Yea, if I love I will not grudge you this' in 'By Way of Remembrance' becomes in *Monna Innominata* 'For if I did not love you, it might be / That I should grudge you some one dear delight'. In 'By Way of Remembrance'

Your overflow of joy shall gladden me,  
My whole heart shall sing praises for your sake  
And find its own fulfilment in your bliss . . .

becomes, in *Monna Innominata*:

Your pleasure is my pleasure, right my right,  
Your honourable freedom makes me free,  
And you companioned I am not alone.

This could not be accidental self-echoing. Given that Rossetti had a limited number of themes and was quite a prolific poet she does not often echo herself very closely. It seems clear that Rossetti has cannibalised 'By Way of Remembrance', an earlier work, in her construction of the later work, *Monna Innominata*.

The subject of Sonnet 3 of 'By Way of Remembrance' is the meeting of lovers on judgment day. Biblical imagery dominates many of the *Monna Innominata* sonnets. Sonnet 3 of 'By Way of Remembrance' pictures the Resurrection and the speaker wonders which is the most terrible: a mass arising, or each body yielding up the grave separately:

In resurrection is it awfuller  
That rising of the All or of the Each:  
Of all kins of all nations and all speech,  
Or one by one of him and him and her?  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 3, III, p. 314)

Line 1 has an awkward 'awfulness' untypical of Rossetti. Although she has countenanced the possibility in the previous sonnet that her lover may find another to sit with him in heaven, and she was more than prepared to take joy in that, the speaker nevertheless still looks forward to their eventual meeting there:



In resurrection may we meet again:  
No more with stricken hearts to part in twain;  
As once in sorrow one, now one in mirth,  
One in our resurrection songs of praise.  
(‘By Way of Remembrance’, Sonnet 3)

This imagined meeting echoes that of the projected meeting of the lovers in *Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 11, where the woman at first tells the man that their meeting again on earth is ‘hopeless . . . and heaven is out of view’. She then goes on to contradict herself by saying that her lover must in heaven affirm before God the absolute devotion with which she has loved him on earth: ‘I charge you at the Judgment make it plain / My love of you was life and not a breath’.

The final sonnet of the ‘By Way of Remembrance’ quartet is a vow of continuing love, an open confession of the speaker’s pledge of love, and her lover’s acknowledgment of it:

I love you and you know it— this at least,  
This comfort is mine own in all my pain:  
You know it and can never doubt again,  
And love’s mere self is a continual feast.  
Not oath of mind nor blessing-word of priest  
Could make my love more certain or more plain . . .  
(‘By Way of Remembrance’, Sonnet 4, III, p. 314)<sup>33</sup>

Many of the *Monna Innominata* sonnets affirm reciprocal love: ‘I loved you first; but afterwards your love, / Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song . . .’ (Sonnet 4), and ‘“Love me, for I love you” — and answer me, / “Love me, for I love you” ’ (Sonnet 7). Sonnet 9 in particular closely echoes Sonnet 4 of ‘By Way of Remembrance’:

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all  
That might have been and now can never be,  
I feel your honoured excellence, and see  
Myself unworthy of the happier call . . .

‘The happier call’, as we discovered a little earlier on, is marriage, the

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<sup>33</sup> This sonnet was dedicated to Charles Bagot Cayley in manuscript. See Kathleen Jones, *Learning Not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti*, p. 157.

'oath' or 'blessing word of priest' spoken of in 'By Way of Remembrance'.

In 'By Way of Remembrance' Sonnet 4, life is compared to a moon in a simile very close to one which appears in Sonnet 1 of *Monna Innominata*:

Life as a rolling moon doth wax and wane  
O weary moon, still rounding, still decreased!  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 4)

My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon  
Between the heavenly days on which we meet . . .  
(*Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 1)

Although moons are well known to wax and wane, given all of the other more dramatic consonances between the two sequences this repetition constitutes further evidence for their close compositional relationship.

The most direct and striking consonance between the two sonnets is an exact repetition of three lines in each.<sup>34</sup> The last sonnet of the quartet ends:

A little while, and age and sorrow cease;  
A little while, and love reborn annuls  
Loss and decay and death— and all is love.  
(*'By Way of Remembrance'*, Sonnet 4)

Sonnet 10 of *Monna Innominata* concludes:

A little while, and age and sorrow cease;  
A little while, and life reborn annuls  
Loss and decay and death, and all is love.  
(*Monna Innominata*, Sonnet 10, II, p. 91)

Rossetti either unconsciously replicated these lines, or sat down with the older, shorter poem before her and deliberately used its themes, diction and sentiments in the process of her composition of *Monna Innominata*.

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<sup>34</sup> Jones (p. 157) and the redoubtable Packer (*Christina Rossetti*, p. 255) mention this repetition in passing but neither explore the detailed relationship which exists between the two sequences.

Having done so she could not publish 'By Way of Remembrance' as it was scarred with the spade marks of *Monna Innominata*.<sup>35</sup>

(ii) *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* and *Monna Innominata*

'Think of my pain, to have to talk to you  
Behind a veil, and never tell my longing . . . '

After her death, William Michael Rossetti found *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* locked in Christina Rossetti's desk. These poems are interesting in many ways. Rossetti's decision to write in Italian is alone suggestive. Three-quarters Italian themselves, all the Rossetti children could write and read Italian and were interested in Italian poetry. For a while they rejected Dante, having been force-fed his works from earliest childhood, but they soon rallied back to the cause. D. G. Rossetti translated *La Vita Nuova* and the works of less well known Italian poets. Maria Francesca, like her father, wrote a study of Dante. Christina Rossetti published articles and a commentary on Dante,<sup>36</sup> and each of her *Monna Innominata* sonnets (the title itself being an Italian form of address) has assigned to it one epigraph from Dante and one from Petrarch.

Christina Rossetti did not write very many Italian poems, and *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* is certainly the most sustained and serious of her Italian works. Why should she choose to compose in Italian? The addressee of the poems is, it seems, Charles Bagot Cayley, so perhaps it was a gesture to his interest in the language?<sup>37</sup> Perhaps she wrote in

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that Rossetti also cannibalised 'Cor Mio', a striking unpublished poem, including part of it in one of the sonnets from the somewhat dour sequence *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets*. 'Cor Mio' seems to be a personal poem, most probably addressed to Cayley, but in 'Later Life' the personal, emotive material has been removed and replaced with seasonal observations.

<sup>36</sup> See Whitla, p. 103. One of Christina Rossetti's works on Dante was an encomium of Cayley's translation of Dante.

<sup>37</sup> Cayley was an Italian scholar. According to William Michael Rossetti (see note below) the sequence was composed from 1862 to 1868, with a hiatus between 1864 and early 1867. Sometime during the 1860s Rossetti and Cayley became engaged. The engagement was broken off in early 1867.

Italian to preserve the inherent secrecy of the document? By background and blood Rossetti was predominantly Italian but she was still an Englishwoman who lived nearly all her life in London. One could surmise that *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* was an experiment in writing a sequences of poems in Italian, but since she was bilingual Rossetti did not need the practice and, in any case, the poems do not read as experiments; they are too honest, too searching and searing. Too close, perhaps, to autobiography.

William Michael Rossetti published the poems after Christina Rossetti's death, giving discreet clues about their autobiographical importance and publishing them as they were written, in Italian, although he was perfectly well qualified to provide a translation.<sup>38</sup> There can be only two reasons why William Michael Rossetti decided not to translate the poems and they are interrelated: he wanted to preserve the integrity of the sequence as a work of Italian literature and, despite his hints about Cayley, he wished to protect his sister's privacy.<sup>39</sup> Crump's edition follows William Michael Rossetti's example in that she does not supply an English translation of the piece. Lona Mosk Packer translates some of the poems in her biography, as do Georgina Battiscombe, Kathleen Jones, and Jan Marsh, but none provide a complete English translation of the entire sequence. For such a translation I am indebted to Margaret Stewart.<sup>40</sup> The sequence as a whole has thus remained inaccessible to all but Italian readers during the one hundred years since Rossetti's death.

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<sup>38</sup> For example, as previously pointed out, in his 'Notes' to *Poetical Works*, pp. 462-3, William Michael Rossetti provided his own translations of the Dante and Petrarch epigraphs attached to *Monna Innominata* rather than using Cayley's translations which he knew Christina Rossetti preferred.

<sup>39</sup> In a note to *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* William Michael Rossetti hinted that the sequence was autobiographical, referring the reader to his 'Memoir' affixed to *Poetical Works* (p. lii) where he points out that Rossetti's relationship with Cayley began towards the end of 1862, then terminated 'except as a matter of feeling' 'towards the opening of 1867', suggesting that the reader see *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente*.

<sup>40</sup> Please see Appendix A of this thesis in which I have reproduced Margaret Stewart's translation of *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente*, which appears as *The Rosy Blush of Dawn, A Collection of Lyric Poems 'To the friend so far away'*.

*Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* consists of twenty-one lyrics of which each has its own title. According to my translator Margaret Stewart, the title of the whole sequence *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* may be translated as *The Blushing Eastern Skies*, *The Dawn-Blush in the East* or *The Rosy Blush of Dawn*. I prefer *The Rosy Blush of Dawn*. Lona Mosk Packer calls it *The Reddening Dawn*<sup>41</sup> and Jan Marsh calls it *Reddening of the East*.<sup>42</sup> There is very little difference between these alternatives. Although I generally refer to the sequence by its Italian name, *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente*, for the sake of convenience I will refer to individual lyrics by their English names.

What then, of the meaning of the title? *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* is an aubade. Rossetti again draws on her Italian heritage in constructing the framework of these very personal poems as she did in the more public poem *Monna Innominata*. Once more she draws on the troubadour tradition with her focus on dawn. Could this dawn be the dawn of Resurrection Day when the speaker and her beloved will be reunited as she has fantasised in all three sequences? The 'reddening' could thus mean that this day is not too far away. If so, it is a hopeful title since it means that the lovers will soon be together once more.

There is, however, one convincing explanation of the title of Rossetti's sequence which has only recently come to light. In her new biography of Rossetti, Jan Marsh reveals that *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* appears to be written in response to a long poem written by Cayley in 1862 called *The Purple of the West*. In Marsh's words this was 'an ambitious production that gradually discloses itself as a love sequence to a fair mistress'.<sup>43</sup>

In its mixing of sonnets and lyrics of varying lengths *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* is not as neatly constructed as *Monna Innominata* (which is a sonnet of sonnets) or the worthy but rather dull *Later Life* (a double

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<sup>41</sup> Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 163.

<sup>42</sup> Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 291.

<sup>43</sup> Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 290. According to Marsh Cayley's poem was published in 1863 in the third Victoria Press anthology, issued to commemorate the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. See p. 292.

sonnet of sonnets). *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* does, however, have a unity of design and reiterates consistent themes. Like *Monna Innominata* and 'By Way of Remembrance' the sonnets of *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente*, with slight variations, are all Petrarchan.<sup>44</sup> In his *Poems* of 1870 D. G. Rossetti published a series of poems collectively titled 'Sonnets and Songs: Towards a work to be called "The House of Life" '.<sup>45</sup> *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* is likewise a collection of 'sonnets and songs', but it has a far greater thematic unity than the 'Sonnets and Songs' selected for publication by D. G. Rossetti.

Like *Monna Innominata* and 'By Way of Remembrance', *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* is an elegy in which a woman sings the song of the death of love: she sings of being separated from her lover, describing the vicissitudes of loving in absence, weighing up respective loves (the love of her for him, of him for her, of both of them for God, and God for them), confessing her love in penetratingly yearning tones. The persona of *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* keeps something back from her audience, but still she confesses more than her sister-speakers of *Monna Innominata* and 'By Way of Remembrance'. *Monna Innominata* confesses much, but it is a very carefully designed poem in which Rossetti took great pains to distance the speaker from herself. *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* was worked on over a number of years, years in which she treated the work as a slowly evolving but united sequence; years in which it seems she must have known that she would never publish it. Since *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* was not written with publication in mind Rossetti had the liberty of being much franker than she allowed herself to be in the graciously tender but restrained *Monna Innominata*, and given the scope of the work, the fact that it incorporates lyrics of varying kinds and lengths, she was more free to experiment with the form which her confessions took.

*Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente's* subtitle tells us that it is a 'Collection of Lyric Poems "To the friend so far away" '.<sup>46</sup> There can be little doubt that

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<sup>44</sup> The Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet form was favoured by Rossetti. Some of her most well known sonnets, such as 'Remember', and 'After Death' are Petrarchan.

<sup>45</sup> See Oswald Doughty ed. *Rossetti's Poems* (London: Dent, 1961), p. xix.

<sup>46</sup> Crump (III, p. 301) titles the sequence *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente Canzoniere* "All'

Cayley was this friend. The years during which the sequence were composed were the years of greatest intimacy between Rossetti and Cayley. Some of the lyrics refer to absence, separation, or the speaker's longing to be reunited with her friend/lover, but these were largely written after the break of 1867. In this sequence the relationship has been severed except in the name of friendship, but the speaker continues to mourn the loss of expectations of professions of reciprocal love.

*Monna Innominata* enacts stages in the affair before the renunciation, then ends with absolute renunciation: 'Silence of love that cannot sing again', whilst the 'By Way of Remembrance' quartet begins after the act of renunciation has taken place. *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* opens during an in-between stage; the speaker has renounced love and has attempted to give up hope but still has buried feelings about her 'friend'. The first lyric, 'Is love sleeping?' reads:

Farewell, my much-loved friend:  
To me love is denied,  
For my beloved lover  
Has already slain my heart.

Yet for that other life  
I place my hopes in you;  
For this life, only memories  
So many, oh, so many.

The tone is at once valedictory. Whilst the first word of 'By Way of Remembrance' was 'Remember', the first word of this elegiac sequence is 'Farewell'. Once again, a sequence begins at a point where the act of renunciation has already taken place. The lover, as in 'By Way of Remembrance' is now also characterised as a friend since he can now have no other role. He was once the 'beloved lover' but he has 'slain my heart'. We do not find out at first how this lover has slain the speaker's heart, just as we never find out why the speaker and beloved of 'By Way of Remembrance' and *Monna Innominata* must part. All three sequences

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Amico *Contano*"— [my italics]. As pointed out to me by Margaret Stewart, 'Contano' is obviously a typographical error since it has no meaning in Italian unless it refers to a person named 'Contano'. William Michael Rossetti prints 'Lontano' which means far away or distant (*Poetical Works*, p. 447).

profess confession but remain silent on certain fundamental issues. However, *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* is much less mysterious on the point of why the lovers must separate than the other two sequences and it is also more emphatic and repetitious in its insistence that the lovers may be reunited in heaven. As the second stanza of the first lyric relates, at the beginning of the sequence the speaker is left with only memories of love and the hope of paradisiacal reunion: 'that other life'.

The first two lyrics form a pair: in one love is 'sleeping', presumably until judgment day, but in the second lyric, 'Is love awakening?' the dormant feelings of love are dangerously rekindled in the speaker but she keeps silent about them. She believes that hope and love may be reborn in the lover, but she will not admit that she feels the same way. She will not articulate love:

Though Love says "Love!" to you;  
And spurs you on, my friend,  
Avowing "That heart is yours"—  
Yet I say it not.

This tendency to be tempted into renouncing renunciation which leads the speaker into a rigid silence was a feature of some of the 'It' poems such as 'Three Stages' which I discussed earlier.

Lona Mosk Packer described the third lyric of *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* as 'a slight and rather unimportant piece'<sup>47</sup>, but the poem is interesting for the playfulness and intimacy it reveals between the speaker and the 'friend'. *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* is a fragment of a larger text. It has interconnections with other, secret texts, some of which Rossetti destroyed, such as the letters which she wrote to Cayley during the years in which the sequence was composed. Rossetti and Cayley corresponded, sent each other objects and wrote poems for each other. For example, Cayley sent Rossetti a sea-mouse and she wrote him a poem about it, and Rossetti's comic poem 'A Sketch' is thought to be addressed to Cayley. Furthermore, Cayley wrote at least two personal poems about Rossetti.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 237.

<sup>48</sup> In 1867 Cayley sent Rossetti this poem:



For several years I was unable to discover the identity of the object referred to by the ambiguous term 'la tocca-caldaja' which Rossetti returns to Cayley in the third lyric.<sup>49</sup> 'Toccare' means touch and 'caldaia' means a cauldron/pot/receptacle made of metal for heating liquids; so I thought that the phrase might refer to a pot or receptacle suitable for heating liquids. William Michael Rossetti states:

The phrase here, 'Se pur fumar nol puoi,' sounds odd. The lines were written in reply to other lines by Cayley named *Si scusa la Tocco-caldaja*. His final line contains the phrase, 'S'ei mi fumma,' and hence Christina's words in reply.<sup>50</sup>

'Si scusa la Tocco-caldaja' may be translated as 'The Tocco-caldaja is begging for an excuse if it is smoked by him'. 'La tocca-caldaja' would then most likely appear to refer to a smoking device. In her new biography which draws substantially on the new resource of Christina Rossetti's complete letters, Jan Marsh baldly states: '... with a *pipe-stem* that Cayley had inadvertently left behind she [Rossetti] sent some discreetly flirtatious lines' [My italics and interpolation].<sup>51</sup> The mysterious is thus solved.

The lyric in question reads:

3. The ----- is being returned.  
['Si rimanda la tocca-caldaja']

Far be it from me the thought

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Methought we met again,  
And from between our hearts a sword  
Was lifted, when a light supreme had stream'd in around us  
And long we talked of mysteries  
And no laws o' the world or flesh presumed any longer  
To sunder or mingle us.

See Jones, p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> My translator, Margaret Stewart, was unable to decipher the meaning of this particular phrase. I consulted many experts in the Italian language but none could provide a positive identification of the object described.

<sup>50</sup> 'Notes', *Poetical Works*, pp. 493-4.

<sup>51</sup> Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 309. Marsh does not cite the source of her information.

Of inheriting this object  
Which once could arouse  
Such love within your breast.  
If you choose not to use it now,  
Nor cannot smoke it either,  
Let it be your sweet duty  
To take care of it forever.

Regardless of the autobiographical significance of the object described, this lyric conveys the impression that the relationship between the speaker and the addressee is one of greater warmth than that described in *Monna Innominata*. It is a more human, less romantic and idealised relationship. Like the speaker of *Monna Innominata*, the speaker of the Italian sequence is often noble and self-effacing, but at other times she sounds thoroughly human, even flirtatious and bitchy. At times she sounds a little resentful of the lover for having caused her so much pain: '... because of you my life lies only half-alive / Because of you I lie awake in bed and weep' (4); at times she doubts the lover: 'And you, so far from me / Are you faithful too?' (8), 'If I were as dear to you / As you are to me / Would I not seek you out?' (14). So persistent is she in her voicing of her wish to meet the lover again that she comes ominously close to whining and at times borders on sarcasm: ' "but if you love you know, / And if you do not, why bare my soul to you?" ' (4), or makes light of uncertainty and despair: ' "He knows I love him, after all, / But does he love me still?" Who knows!' (15). This speaker is by no means as assured of her lover as is the speaker of *Monna Innominata*. Absence and separation make her at times pettish and untrusting, solipsistic in her pain, so that she suspects that the renounced relationship was not as important to the lover as it is was to her.

*Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente*, much more than the other two sequences, plays with the idea of the difference between lovers and friends. In several of the lyrics the lover is addressed as 'friend': 'Farewell, my much-loved friend' (1), 'Friend who is more than friend' (5), 'My friend, my more than friend' (19). In number 15 the speaker becomes both more specific and more coy about what she will give in terms of friendship. It reads: 'Truly I desire to be / All or nothing to you', then a footnote informs us: 'But no; if not my lover, be my friend: / What I will be to you,

I shall not tell you now'. In number 10 the speaker manufactures elaborate conceits about the interrelationship of friendship and love, concluding that love will win on the day of judgment.

Cayley and Rossetti were friends until the end of his life. Cayley died at the end of 1883 (after the appearance of *Monna Innominata*). He made Rossetti his literary executor and bequeathed to her a desk containing a ring and a packet of her letters to him. Number 11 of Rossetti's sequence, 'Luscious and Sorrowful', provides us with more evidence that Cayley was the addressee of *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* as it was written in response to a poem of Cayley's published in *The Nation* a few days earlier. Cayley's poem reads:

'Noli me Tangere'

Luscious and sorrowful bird o'the roses,  
To the vexed March winds prematurely singing.  
Would that a warm hand I could have held thee;  
Kept from a withering chill thy timid heart.

Now have I terrified, now have I pained thee  
Now with stiffening blood have I tangled  
All thy bosom's tremulous plumage,  
For a thorn, for a thorn was against it.<sup>52</sup>

In *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* Rossetti replies:

11. ' "Luscious and sorrowful" \*'

O bird— of roses and of sorrow,  
Bird of love,  
Happy and sad together, that song of yours  
Is it laughter or tears?  
Faithful to the faithless, you find on a cold shore  
Thorns for your nest.

\*Did she perch thee on hand or shoulder?

Rossetti, who frequently used mating birds to symbolise lovers, is here characterised by Cayley as a bird, wounded perhaps by too-overt expressions of love. In Rossetti's lyric, however, she seems to turn Cayley's poem around and treat him as the injured bird; perhaps he is

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<sup>52</sup> See Jones, p. 141.

still faithful and it is she who has faithlessly renounced him?

Three posthumously published poems tell the same story as *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente*: of lovers separated because of a difference of religious belief, the pain of renunciation, and the hope to meet again in heaven. These poems, which I will quote in full below, act as a gloss on *Monna Innominata*, 'By Way of Remembrance' and, most especially, *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente*. The first, a rough fragment, deals with the prevalent pattern of renunciation: the silence attendant upon this renunciation, then the reawakening of hope:

I said "All's over"— & I made my  
Thenceforward to keep silence &  
From any hope or enterprise aga  
But as one certain day the sap  
Sun warmed & solaced in its f  
So something stirred in me th  
And all my hardness broke [illegible fragment]  
And hope once more tended [illegible fragment]  
(III, p. 326) [Crump's interpolations]

The other two poems deal with the separation of the lovers due to religious differences, and the hope for reunion in heaven:

I said good bye in hope:  
But now we meet again  
I have no hope at all  
Of anything but pain,  
Our parting & our meeting  
Alike in vain.

Hope on thro' all your life  
Until the end, dear Friend.  
Live thro' the noble life  
Where joy & promise blend:  
I too will live my life  
Until the end.

Long may your vine entwine,  
Long may your figtree spread  
Their paradise of shade  
Above your cherished head:  
My shelter was a gourd,  
And it is dead.

Yet when out of a grave  
We are gathered home at last,  
Then may we own life split  
No good worth holding fast: —

Death had its bitterness  
But it is past.  
(III, p. 337)

Had fortune parted us  
Fortune is blind,  
Had Anger parted us  
Anger unkind —  
But since God parts us  
Let us part humbly  
Bearing our burden  
Bravely & dumbly.

And since there is but one  
Heaven, not another,  
Let us not close that door  
Against each other.  
God's Love is higher than mine,  
Christ's tenfold proved,  
Yet even I would die  
For thee Beloved.  
(III, p. 338)

The Italian poems are much more explanatory about the bar between the lovers— the reason for their earthly separation— than *Monna Innominata*. The seventh, ninth, and twelfth lyrics bear on this subject. These are full, rounded poems, not fragmentary laments as are some of the short lyrics. Number 9 'May God Enlighten us!' is particularly helpful:

But above me you chose virtue,  
The truth, my friend: and will you never know  
Whom you loved in the end? The flower can open  
Only to the sunlight.

If you loved Truth more than you loved me,  
That unknown Love was Jesus:—  
O Jesus, Who spoke unrecognised to him,  
Conquer his heart.

Is this sophistry? The 'virtue' referred to could be the lover's refusal to pretend to faith he could not feel in order to keep his beloved and stave off her renunciation of him. The 'truth' he chose was the 'truth' of his own opinions, that is, his uncertainty of religious belief. The lyric speaker, however, turns this adherence to 'truth' (which caused them

both such pain) into a virtue akin to faith. The speaker converts the 'truth' of the lover's agnosticism into the truth of Jesus, 'Who spoke unrecognised to him' and will win him over in the end.

Number 7 has a similar theme. The speaker claims she would happily yield up 'my heart' (meaning the lover/friend whom she is addressing rather than her own heart) to God if he (the lover) could only be taught to love Him. This, she states, will eventually bring him great happiness as he will see her (his beloved) again and forget the pain of the past while she shall be thankful for all eternity because he will be with God and 'your soul, new-redeemed, / My own reward shall be'.

Rossetti frequently 'has it both ways' in her imagined paradise. Lovers are at one with God and simultaneously at one with each other. The speaker of all three lyric sequences has the constant wish (or hope) for reunion in paradise: 'Will you be there too?' as she asked in 'By Way of Remembrance', but the lover must repent and be redeemed before he can go to heaven. Rossetti's oft vocalised death-wish, or *vanitas vanitatum* theme, paradoxically intoxicates us with the loveliness of mutable earthly things so it is hard to believe in the attractions of her heaven. In 'The Convent Threshold', for instance, the novice imagines her future in heaven and begs her lover to repent because she will not be happy there without him: 'Should I not turn with yearning eyes, / Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?' Similarly, 'Blumine' of *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente*, Number 4 declares:

If I were to meet you in the peace of Paradise  
For me it would be peace no more, but heaven of delights.  
If I were to meet you in the circles of the damned,  
In truth your fate I would regret more than my own.

Given Rossetti's usual responses to the theme of heaven/hell it is a wonder that hell does not become a heaven due to the presence of the lover!

Nevertheless, it seems at times that the presence of the lover in heaven is more important to the speaker than the heavenly experience itself as if the Resurrection were designed merely for the unification of lovers separated on earth. *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* is more confident than

*Monna Innominata* about heavenly reunion; in particular the speaker is more confident that the lover will be redeemed through Jesus. It is almost as if the speaker, through these poem/prayers (numbers 7, 9 and 12 are on the cusp of poem and prayer) is making a deal with God: she is renouncing her lover on earth and thereby giving him up to God as long as she can have him back in the hereafter. As she states in Number 12 entitled 'Oh, the all-powerful force of humble prayer'— :

What shall I give Thee, my good Lord Jesus?  
 Ah, what I love the best, that I shall give Thee:  
 Accept him, Lord Jesus my God,  
 My only sweet Love, my very heart;  
 Accept him for Thyself, let him be precious to Thee;  
 Accept him for my sake, save my beloved spouse.  
 He is all I have, Lord, do not despise him,  
 Keep him in your heart among the cherished ones.  
 Be mindful of the day, when on the cross  
 You prayed to God with failing voice,  
 And yearning heart: "Father, forgive them  
 For they know not what they do"—:  
 He too, Lord, knows not whom he is offending  
 He too, if taught, will learn to love Thee.

The speaker then begs Jesus, as she has in number 9, to construe the lover's love for her, and his love of truth as somehow love of Jesus, or, if this is not so, let him fill them both with his love so that it will *become* so:

If all is vanity which is not Thee:  
 And he calls in the void who does not pray to Thee  
 If love which loves not Thee cannot be love:—  
 Give to us Thyself, we shall be rich . . .

As I have shown, *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* goes beyond *Monna Innominata* both in confessing the reason for the separation of lovers on earth and devising a means whereby they may be reunited. In *Monna Innominata* reunion on earth is 'hopeless' and 'heaven is out of view': it is unknown and unreachable. Because there can be no reunion in *Monna Innominata* the speaker is chained to silence. Once the act of renunciation is made she must remain dumb. But the speaker of *Il Rosseggjar dell' Oriente* has found hope in the prospect of her lover's salvation: he will be admitted to heaven and his soul will be her reward for the pain of having

been bereft of him on earth. The sequence ends in some pain and some uncertainty, but with the salving plea to Jesus that after her suffering and faith the speaker's love will be restored to her. In the final lyric, as in the twelfth, the speaker reminds Jesus Christ of the crucifixion, implicitly comparing her own suffering with his, and begging for her reward:

21.

[If only it were so]

I loved you more than ever you loved me:—  
So be it, if the Lord God wills it so;  
So be it, however it may tear my heart,  
Lord Jesus.

But Thou who remembereth and knoweth all,  
Thou who in the cause of love didst die,  
In the other world present that heart to me  
Who loved it so.

'By Way of Remembrance', *Monna Innominata* and *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* may be regarded as substantially the same work. The quartet was not published because of its relationship with *Monna Innominata*: it was a short prototype for the longer sequence. Similarly, *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* was not published, because it was too personal, both in content, and in form. I hold that *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* was written before *Monna Innominata*. *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* is therefore the private, original elegiac lyric sequence which has as its public face *Monna Innominata*.



## Chapter Two

### The Abhorred 'I'

Introspection and Deflection  
in the  
Love Lyrics of William Morris

#### I: 'Love's Calendar'

The Seasonal Lyrics of *The Earthly Paradise*

'Ah! all things die and come again,  
Ah! all things but the feet of men  
They die, and never come again!'



WILLIAM Morris's 'Seasonal Lyrics' are the poems appended to the calendar months of *The Earthly Paradise*,<sup>1</sup> each of which bears the name of the month which it represents. The sequence begins in spring (March), the beginning of the seasonal year, and extends through to winter (February), the month which represents the end of the seasonal year. Subsumed within the many outer and inner frames of narrative in *The Earthly Paradise*, the Seasonal Lyrics may easily be overlooked. There are only twelve of them and hundreds of pages of tales separate them, they have no collective title and they are unpretentious in scope, yet they collectively form one poem which examines the manifold mysteries of love, mutability, and human aspiration. Morris's poem only gradually, and seemingly reluctantly, reveals itself to be a love poem. The poem begins as a Shepherd's Calendar but grows into a love poem. Although these lyrics apostrophise the months, more importantly they are love poems in which the progress of the seasonal year becomes a metaphor for the ever-changing relationship of a pair of lovers.

I have named the poems 'seasonal' lyrics rather than 'monthly' lyrics because the four seasons are much more important in the poems than the twelve individual months which embody them. Each season spans three months; the first month sees the birth of the season, the second represents the height of that particular season, while the third month witnesses its death. There is, of course, overlap between the seasons. The

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<sup>1</sup> William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, volumes 3-6. Subsequent references to *Collected Works* will be indicated parenthetically by volume and page numbers in the text.

last month of a particular season marks the end of that season, yet it also heralds the fast approaching first month of the next season. The old season is mourned and the new one welcomed in the continuing tide of time and life.

These poems are often granted only fleeting asides in discussions of *The Earthly Paradise*.<sup>2</sup> Only a few studies have treated them, apart from the role they play in the schema of *The Earthly Paradise*, as lyric poems in their own right.<sup>3</sup> The general lack of critical interest in the Seasonal Lyrics stems from the fact that the poems have both an 'invisibility' due to their position in *The Earthly Paradise*, and a reticence which stems from Morris's reluctance to write love poetry in the first-person.

Morris stated 'I abhor introspective poetry'.<sup>4</sup> Morris's constant subject is love, but he invariably treats this subject by means of third-person narrative (as in *The Earthly Paradise*) or the use of protagonist-narrators (as in his ballads). He does not often use the offensively 'introspective', first-person lyric form. The narrator of the Seasonal Lyrics may or may not be Morris himself, it is enough that Morris hated poetry which *appeared* to be personal. The Seasonal Lyrics thus represent a rare foray into the realm of hated 'introspective poetry' and offer many interesting insights into Morris's treatment of that form. Ironically, it is Morris's very reluctance to write love poetry which makes these poems interesting as love poems. The Seasonal Lyrics have a universal tone in that they speak of the experience of love in broad, abstract terms: they trace the interconnections of an individual's desire for love, nostalgia for past happiness, impatience with the transitory nature of present happiness and dread of coming change and death. Yet the Seasonal Lyrics are also intimate in tone; they are the 'introspective' musings of a

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Florence S. Boos, 'The Argument of the Earthly Paradise', *VP*, 13 (1985), p. 88, and Elizabeth Strode, 'The Crisis of *The Earthly Paradise*', *VP*, 13 (1975), p. 72 and p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> See Blue Calhoun, *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris: The Earthly Paradise*, pp. 221-30, Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, pp. 79-82, and Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, pp. 62-67.

<sup>4</sup> *Collected Works*, VI, p. ix.

particular narrator who does not explain the precise circumstances which give rise to the continual emotional and psychological crises which he reveals.

Although the lyrics appear to be addressed to the beloved woman, they are equally self-communing. E. P. Thompson, amongst others, has assumed that the sequence is autobiographical. The confession of the lyric singer seems personal in nature, and although the relationship of the speaker and his auditor is only dimly outlined it seems clear that his love is returned only sporadically or in memory.

The poems of *The Earthly Paradise* period were all written at a time when, as the general consensus of Morris scholars now has it, Morris was forced to accept his wife's affair with D. G. Rossetti and to surrender his hopes of her ever coming to love him.<sup>5</sup> Morris and his contemporaries did their best to bury this information. His official biographer, Edward Burne-Jones's son-in-law J. W. Mackail, was privy to much information which he did not release. Mackail confined himself to publicly remarking that the Seasonal Lyrics revealed 'an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself'.<sup>6</sup> In a private letter written in 1899 (after Morris's death in 1896) Mackail wrote that his account of 'all those stormy years of *The Earthly Paradise* time and all the time following it must be excessively flat', owing to the amount of tact 'a quality unpleasantly near untruthfulness often' that 'had to be exercised right and left'.<sup>7</sup> Morris himself was excessively taciturn in regard to his private life, but in the Seasonal Lyrics, and increasingly in even more personal lyrics, he began writing about his own grief in sometimes veiled, but sometimes passionate, even angry, terms. Only very rarely did Morris give reign to his unhappiness in his private letters. In a letter to his wife Jane, in a rare tone of intimacy he once revealed his despondency:

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<sup>5</sup> See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary*, Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Works and Friends*, and Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. Mackail, volume 1, p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> See Henderson, p. 93. The letter is in Henderson's own collection.

For me I don't think people really want to die because of mental pain, that is if they are imaginative people; they want to live to see the play played out fairly— they have hopes they are not conscious of . . . <sup>8</sup>

The Seasonal Lyrics have a reticence peculiar to Morris. Love lyrics do not always 'tell all' of the situations in which lovers meet, part, rejoice, or sorrow— this is the function of narrative poetry or the novel— but Morris's poems are more guarded than most. Both Blue Calhoun and Amanda Hodgson use the word 'shadow' to describe the Seasonal Lyrics. Calhoun refers to the 'shadowed loveliness' of the sequence, and Hodgson claims that the story of speaker and beloved is a 'shadowy' one.<sup>9</sup> Much of Morris's love poetry is 'shadowy' and silent; the nature of the relationship between the speaker and his beloved is sometimes difficult to discern, but the articulation of emotion is at times surprisingly fierce, direct, and passionate.

The Seasonal Lyrics are part of the complex of poems which embrace the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. The framing structure of the whole poem begins with the 'Apology' spoken by the creator of the sequence of tales. The 'Apology' is followed by the long 'Prologue' which explains the philosophic, geographical, temporal and cultural context of the tales to follow. The Wanderers, men from Norway who fled the plague of the early fourteenth century, set sail to discover The Earthly Paradise. Failing in their quest, aged and weary, they come to a Mediterranean island populated by a race descended from the Greeks. The Elders of this community and the Wanderers agree to meet each month and exchange stories from their respective stores of folklore and legend. The twenty-four tales, apportioned two to each month of the year, follow. After the tales have ended the speaker of the 'Apology' appears again to farewell his work in the 'Epilogue', followed by 'l'Envoi'.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, volume 1, 1848-1880 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Calhoun, p. 223, and Hodgson, p. 63.

The Seasonal Lyrics have a part to play as one of a series of responses to the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. They form part of the interlude between the tales which helps to direct the reader's appreciation of the philosophical import of each tale as it ends and they set the mood for the tale to follow. In this task the Seasonal Lyrics strike a sometimes uneasy relationship with the linking passages which also occupy the interlude position between the tales. Rather than seeing the Seasonal Lyrics as echoing the responses of the auditors of the tales, a more useful way of looking at the lyrics is to see them as the central poem to which the experience of the auditors of *The Earthly Paradise* constitutes a framework. According to Calhoun: 'The Wanderers of the framework are a chorus who mirror the experience of the lyric poet'.<sup>10</sup>

The twelve lyrics form part of the larger song of *The Earthly Paradise* by showing one of a number of responses to the pain of love and the dread of change and death. They trace the progress of the seasonal year, but more importantly they examine moods or phases in the emotional life of the speaker. Although they have consonances in mood with the interlude passages, the lyrics do not belong to them: they are personal and confessional in tone, they are set in modern times (not medieval) and they describe the seasonal changes of life in the English countryside (not the environs of a Mediterranean island); thus they have no direct point of contact with the tales. Indeed the speaker does not seem aware of the context in which his utterances are recorded; he shows no knowledge of the tales or their tellers.

Some critics have not drawn a distinction between the lyrics and the linking passages which follow them. Elizabeth Strode, for instance, writes:

The introductory verses of 'September' betray the participation of the author in the narrative. Stanzas four to six indicate that the Mariners, sitting comfortably beneath the trees, are willing to forget their worries . . .<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Calhoun, p. 230.

<sup>11</sup> Strode, p. 71.

Strode is mistaken on two counts. First, she misleads the reader by referring to the first few stanzas of the linking passage as 'stanzas four to six', counting them as a continuation of the lyric. Although the Seasonal Lyrics are placed side by side with the connecting passages as interludes between the pairs of tales they are separate and distinct creations, different in both nature and function. They have different rhyme schemes and their separation is reflected typographically: in *Collected Works* the lyric generally has a page to itself. When lyric and connecting passage share a page the passage is set off from the lyric by the addition of a large initial capital to the first letter of the first word of the passage.

Second, I take issue with Strode's assertion that the lyric singer is the 'author' of the narrative. Strode and other commentators agree that the speaker or singer of the monthly verses is the same as that of the 'Apology', the early part of the 'Prologue', the linking passages, the 'Epilogue' and 'l'Envoi', and since, as we have seen, the lyrics have been regarded as personal, confessional utterances, some commentators take this speaker to be Morris. Strode assumes that the speaker of the 'Seasonal Lyrics' is 'the author', either Morris's narrator-figure, or Morris himself. Regardless of the assumption that the lyrics are autobiographical, we must examine the received idea that the outer frames (the 'Apology', the earlier parts of the 'Prologue', the 'Epilogue' and 'l'Envoi') and the inner frames (the Seasonal Lyrics and the linking passages) are all spoken by the same narrator.

While the narrator of the linking passages may be the creator-figure of the outer-frames, he is *not* the singer of the Seasonal Lyrics. The creator-figure is much like the Geoffrey of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: although he may be very similar to the author, he too is a fiction. A short poem at the end of the 'Prologue' makes it clear that the Apologist and the narrator of the first part of the 'Prologue' are one and the same: the creator-figure of the sequence. In the 'Prologue' poem the narrator, like the Apologist and the writer of 'l' Envoi', speaks of the 'book' (*The Earthly Paradise*) in metaphors. The principal reason for my identification of the singer of the Seasonal Lyrics as a separate persona from the creator-figure of the outer frames and the linking passages is his unselfconsciousness:

he sings to himself or to his love unaware of his audience and unlike the creator-figure mentioned above he never mentions 'the book'. Furthermore, the auditors of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* cannot hear the songs of the lyric singer since he lives far removed from them in a distant time and place. Admittedly, on a few occasions the singer *seems* to be connected with the tales and their tellers and audience. For example, in the lyric for June there appears to be a resemblance between the location of the singer and the location of the Wanderers and Elders—both finding pleasant retreats far upstream in which to enjoy the summer weather. However, the modern singer's place is an English one: 'This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names. / This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames',<sup>12</sup> rather than the 'nameless island' which is the habitation of the Wanderers and Elders. The similarity between 'June' and the linking passage can be explained due to the season evoked in both: it is almost inevitable that the lyrics and connecting passages will have much in common since they each describe the same season, its characteristic birds, flowers and scented air. The lyric for September seems to tie in a little more securely with the tales and their creator. The singer asks:

What images of grey-clad damsels sweet  
 Shall cross thy sward with dainty noiseless feet?  
 What nameless shamefast longings make alive,  
 Soft-eyed September, will thy sad heart give?  
 (IV, p. 1)

Here the lyric singer at first appears to be the creator of the tales pleading with the current month as his current muse, for inspiration. Yet he may be simply asking for a beguiling image with which to assuage his painful longings rather than self-consciously asking for help in fashioning the tales. The medievalised way in which the singer has described the damsels need not mean that the singer is aware of the surrounding tales and auditors. Throughout this poetry Morris tended to medievalise in his descriptions. In the Seasonal Lyrics maidens are always 'grey-eyed',

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<sup>12</sup> See May Morris's comments on the upper reaches of the Thames in connection with 'June' in *CW*, IV, pp. xii-j-xiv.

birds are always 'brown' and thrushes are known by archaic English terms such as 'throstle' and 'ousel' although the poems themselves have a contemporary English setting.

The Seasonal Lyrics began life as simple narrative devices designed to introduce each tale but they gradually changed into love poems. An examination of the variants of several of the lyrics reveals Morris's changing conception of their nature and function. In the sequence two species of poem are at war: love poem rapidly steals the march on hymn of praise to the month. May Morris published variants of 'June', 'July', 'October' (or 'November', it has no title) and 'January', 'February' and 'March' in her introduction to Volume 6 of *Collected Works* (pp. xxvij-xxix). In Volume XXIV, variants for the months of March, April and May are included in the section entitled 'Poems of The Earthly Paradise Time (About 1865-1870)'. The poems of Volume VI (pp. 345-66) for June and July and the Volume XXIV poems for March, April and May are similar in both form and content. May Morris states that the Volume VI 'June' and 'July' were written in a notebook dated 1861 which means that they were written considerably earlier than the Volume XXIV poems, yet both the earlier and the later poems appear to have been designed to play a similar role within the structure of the larger poem. The Volume XXIV poems and the 1861 poems from Volume VI each have fourteen lines and are divided into two stanzas. They are naïve verses showing none of the formality and polish of the final poems; they briefly describe the month and season and clumsily introduce the tales to follow, thus dispensing with the need for connecting passages. For example, 'March' in Volume XXIV devotes only a few lines to evoking the weather of the season before it moves on to a simple exposition of the scene at the first session of story-telling:

And day by day the sunset later grows  
And on red hedges green buds you may spy,  
On such a day of March, when eve was nigh,  
In March, when the gold-bringing east wind blows  
And bright and cloudless is the pale blue sky . . .  
In a fair hall, those old men sat talking  
With people of the land; and many a thing  
Of ancient stories, one to other told . . . .  
(XXIV, p. 345)



The other fourteen line lyrics follow a similar pattern, except for 'July' which has a little more in common with the final version. 'July' is the only fourteen-line variant to adopt a personal tone. The speaker addresses his love, but then rather haphazardly attempts to introduce a tale:

See now the bright-eyed squirrel leaves his bed  
To gaze on us, need we weep for the spring  
If this should last, that goes like every thing.  
Hearken, O love, to ancient tales to-day  
I heard of elders ere they passed away.  
(VI, p. xxvij)

The transition jars. 'July' reveals the conflict of the many functions which Morris is trying to cram into a short lyric. He wants the poem to evoke the season by reference to its characteristic weather, flora and fauna, but he also indicates a growing interest in charting the course of the speaker's emotional life *and* he wants to set the scene for the tales to follow. The centre could not hold; therefore Morris abandoned the fourteen-line multi-purpose lyric and in doing so changed the nature and role of the Seasonal Lyrics.

According to May Morris the variants of October or possibly November (I am inclined to think this particular variant is for October, rather than November), January, February, and March contained in Volume VI were 'written on half sheets of note-paper' and 'were left aside as the book grew' (p. xxviii). These poems, written during the composition of *The Earthly Paradise*, have much in common with the final published versions. Like the final versions they do not have the mundane task of setting scene; thus a need is created for separate linking passages. The lyric is lengthened to twenty-one lines in which Morris explores the changing seasons observed in connection with the changing emotions of the speaker.

Rather than being a conventional Shepherd's Calendar the Seasonal Lyrics are an agonised, sometimes frenzied exploration of existential issues: of love, of loss, of the brief intangibility of human happiness—a happiness dependent upon the covenant of human sexual love which in

common with everything worldly is transient. Like Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (and its forerunner, the quartet 'By Way of Remembrance'), her Italian sequence *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* and D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*, Morris's Seasonal Lyrics can be collectively viewed as an elegy which celebrates sexual love whilst burying it.

Morris's seasonal year begins in spring, the beginning of the 'natural' year. The first lyric, 'March', opens with a rhetorical flourish: 'Slayer of the winter art thou here again?' / O welcome, thou that bringst the summer nigh! March is applauded for its mild weather which promises the eventual coming of summer. The singer treats March as a handmaiden heralding the arrival of summer (beginning in June), and thus banishing winter. Instead of focusing praise on March for her individual virtues as a spring month he praises her for her role as harbinger of summer. Here Morris sets a pattern which will be followed in almost all of the following lyrics; his speaker pays a rather backhanded compliment to the present season in reference to the seasons it succeeds and precedes. Never content with the current month or season he always looks forward to the more congenial season to come in which he might be happy, regretting that he had not made the most of the season that has passed. In the sequence there can be no lasting, unqualified happiness. The third stanza is largely spoken by Death, the begetter of 'all this storm of bliss' who determines the range of our pleasures and bids us enjoy while we can all that Death and life provide.

'April' too contains ominous warnings about the future which tend to spoil the pleasure experienced in the present. Here the month April is not explicitly apostrophised, but is nonetheless personified, being referred to as the much-celebrated 'fair midspring'. In 'March' the speaker looked forward to summer; now in the second stanza of 'April' he cautions that summer may be nearer than before, but summer harbours inherent dangers:

When Summer brings the lily and the rose,  
She brings us fear; her very death she brings  
Hid in her anxious heart, the forge of woes;  
And, dull with fear, the mavis no more sings.  
(III, p. 82)

The speaker extols the myriad virtues of temperate, thriving April only to caution us that summer may be beautiful, but the coming of the emblematic lily and the rose which bloom at the height of the season mean that summer will soon die bringing again autumn and winter which mean death. Still April is praised as it has the means to resurrect itself in the 'hopeful seed' beneath the earth. 'March' was praised as the herald of summer but now that summer is getting closer, the singer finds cause to prefer the spring which is fast slipping away.

A note of personal confession is introduced in the last stanza where the speaker talks of his yearning for both the past and the unimaginable something which breeds his discontent:

Ah! life of all the year, why yet do I  
Amid thy snowy blossoms' fragrant drift,  
Still long for that which never draweth nigh,  
Striving my pleasure from my pain to sift,  
Some weight from off my fluttering mirth to lift?  
Now, when far bells are ringing, 'Come again,  
Come back past years! why will ye pass in vain?'  
(III, p. 169)

The speaker of 'April' experiences a disjunction between himself, the season and the month in which it is embodied. April is praised as 'life of all the year' but he cannot be happy there. In both the 'March' and 'April' poems the speaker suffers from a listless dissatisfaction with his life in the present.

The bells in the last stanza represent the ringing out of the old year and the ringing in of the new. They are the bells which at one time dominated village life: the bells of christenings, weddings and funerals. Bells represent time, and every time Morris's speaker hears the sound of bells he panics, remembering the loss of things once loved now swallowed up in time or fearing the loss of now treasured things in the abyss of time which looms ahead.

May, the month traditionally reserved for lovers, brings the first mention of the loved one who will be present, or conspicuously absent, throughout the rest of the series. After this point the month is not often directly addressed; instead the speaker directs his comments towards his love with, possibly, asides to himself which he is too fearful to

communicate to his auditor. He begins 'O Love', inquiring of his beloved whether she has witnessed the vision which he later communicates to us. It seems that the lovers sleep in the forest like Tristram and Iseult since there is no mention of a house in this lyric. The lovers wander wraithlike around a small hamlet near a tributary of the Thames.

The season is not explicitly described. Instead a shifting, surreal vision occupies the speaker's thoughts. May brings no rejoicing: a dream of Eros and his attendants disporting themselves in the forest gives way to a far more terrible scene:

For then methought the Lord went by  
To take possession of this flowery throne,  
Ringed round with maids, and youths, and minstrelsy;  
A little while I sighed to find him gone,  
A little while the dawning was alone,  
And the light gathered; then I held my breath,  
And shuddered at the sight of Eld and Death.  
(IV, p. 1)

Love is only a dream vision, while dawn brings knowledge of aging and death which banish thoughts of love. This is a quite peculiar lyric. At first sight many of the Seasonal Lyrics seem rather average examples of pastoral poems, until one notices the strange push and pull which occurs in them between silence and confession, introspection and deflection.

'June' is one of the last lyrics primarily concerned with evoking the months rather than concentrating on the muted tale of the speaker's unreturned love. It opens:

O June, O June, that we desired so,  
Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?  
Across the river thy soft breezes blow  
Sweet with the scents of beanfields far away,  
Above our heads rustle the aspens grey,  
Calm is the sky with harmless clouds beset,  
No thought of storm the morning vexes yet.  
(IV, p. 87)

As mentioned earlier, 'June' seems more closely allied to the linking passages than the other lyrics. The identity of the 'we' of this lyric is at first difficult to determine. In some of the lyrics 'we' may be taken to mean the speaker and his love, but here it is a less specific term; the

speaker refers to 'we pensive men' a term which could indicate all humankind including the Wanderers or it might simply mean 'all pensive men like me'. This lyric evokes a feeling of closely guarded peace, the beauty of the still weather being 'a rare happy dream' masking something far less pleasant. In 'June' the beloved woman is not mentioned; in fact she has only been mentioned thus far in 'May' but she is soon to enter the sequence more decisively. 'June' conjures a sense of perfect peace and rest— it is a lull in the tumult of life. Morris's singer addresses June as a god: 'See, we have left our hopes and fears behind / To give our very hearts up unto thee'. It seems that a sacrifice or purification ritual has been undergone so that the speaker, in an attempt to forget both hope and fear can 'give' himself wholeheartedly to June. June is merely a brief respite from the trouble concomitant with love as 'July' will soon prove.

'July' sees the lyric singer engaged in a fleeting communion with his love followed by its inevitable sequel: estrangement and despair. 'July' is the first of the lyrics in which details are given about an incident in the relationship of the speaker and beloved woman. Like George Meredith's elongated sonnets in his *Modern Love* sequence, some of the Seasonal Lyrics open immediately after the occurrence of an important change in the relationship of the speaker and his beloved. Addressing himself to the woman, the speaker recalls an hour in the very recent past when he had believed that they were happy together; a rare closeness was experienced, a compact made, but now:

... thunder and wild rain  
Have wrapped the cowering world, a foolish sin  
And nameless pride has made us wise in vain.  
(IV, p. 143)

The conditions of the natural world imitate the changing relationship of the couple, with the crucial difference that the weather will soon clear again, but the perfect moment of their kiss may not again be attained. It seems that the speaker is preternaturally affected by the changing seasons, living through them and seeing many parallels between them and his changing relationship with his mistress. For example, the speaker

believes that his relationship is dying like the dying year but struggles against this knowledge; just as the seasons always come around once more, so he hopes to resurrect his dying love. The speaker of the lyrics is always trying to engage the attention of the woman in order to reassure her of his love and his hope for the future, but she seems resigned to the death of the relationship, only occasionally smiling on him and reminding him of a more pleasant past in their relationship. His love is unreturned. Perhaps it has never been returned but until now he has maintained the illusion of love.

'August' is again intimate in tone, but at this point in the sequence the speaker begins to look more closely at his surroundings and specify what he observes in the landscape which is now a less anonymous and timeless one. It is a distinctly English landscape described with the use of some archaic words such as 'hind', 'withy', 'hurdle' and 'foss', terms which serve to remind the reader that this rural English landscape may be described in modern times but that it has changed very little since medieval times (the time of the Wanderers). May Morris states that the stanzas for August tell of Sinodun Hill and the abbey church of Dorchester. In the draft there were four stanzas, the excised stanza reads:

In this sweet field high raised above the Thames  
Beneath the trenched hill of Sinodun  
Amidst sweet dreams of disembodied names  
Abide the setting of the August sun,  
Here where this long ridge tells of days now done;  
This moveless wave wherewith the meadow heaves  
Beneath its clover and its barley-sheaves.<sup>13</sup>

In 'August' the speaker describes for the benefit of his beloved the landscape ahead of them as he will in following lyrics where he begs her to look at, or shun, the view. He at first rejoices in the beauty and calm of the vista, then reflects that his happiness must be spoilt because 'we' (himself, the woman and all of us) waste days like this by not fully

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<sup>13</sup> See CW, IV, pp. xij-xijj.

enjoying them because we always wish for something more than we have. The last stanza reads:

Ah, love! such happy days, such days as these,  
Must we still waste them, craving for the best,  
Like lovers o'er the painted images  
Of those once their yearning hearts have blessed?  
Have we been happy on our day of rest?  
Thine eyes say "yes," but if it came again,  
Perchance its ending would not seem so vain.  
(IV, p. 187)

The beloved woman does not appear in 'September', and this seems appropriate given the distrust with which the speaker has treated her 'yes' in the preceding lyric. However, although she is not present she seems to be the cause of the speaker's mood. He addresses September, asking what it holds for him, what vision, what hope, as if turning to September and the future in order to forget the pain of the past and present: he 'lives for the future'. The tone of regret for the past and a futile wish to possess once more things of the past which were not fully appreciated at the time is sounded again:

Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries  
To dream again the dream that made him glad  
When in his arms his loving love he had.  
(V, p. 1)

'October' is one of the most moving and accomplished of the lyrics which along with 'November' deserves to stand alone as a love lyric. It is a sadder 'Dover Beach'. Here, seeing the dying of the year in autumn, the speaker is tempted to look forward to death, to give up the struggle and ease into oblivion:

And we too— will it not be soft and kind,  
That rest from life, from patience and from pain,  
That rest from bliss we know not when we find,  
That rest from Love which ne'er the end can gain?  
(V, p. 122)

He ends with a frightened, grasping affirmation of life and love: 'Look up, love!— ah, cling close and never move! / How can I have enough of life and love?'

In 'November' the scales shift even further over to the side of love lyric— the month is almost forgotten. Again, as in the two lyrics immediately preceding, the speaker directs the gaze of the woman. Here, he directs her to 'Look out upon the real world' in order to escape the dreaded suffocation of a metaphorical room of memory which she inhabits 'hung with pain and dreams'. This real world of November has seemed to him 'the changeless seal of change', guaranteeing that fair things die since it heralds the death of the year:

Strange image of the dread eternity,  
In whose void patience how can these have part,  
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?  
(V, p. 206)

Yet still he cannot say 'enough' and be content to surrender life and love. As Christina Rossetti put the problem: 'How can I say enough on earth / Enough on earth with craving heart?'

'December' has a more urban landscape than the previous poems. The autumn and winter lyrics concentrate more on cloud and sky since on earth there is little to see; birds and flowers are driven into hiding and snow comes to cover the ground. In this lyric the church bells ring again indicating the beginning and end of the human calendar year rather than the seasonal year to which this calendar of months has adhered. The speaker addresses himself to the woman. His chill honesty is disarming. He says although she may not be able to discern anything that is good in the world and there is no God, since she cannot actually curse him he begs her to keep him by her.

In 'January' there is a crisis, similar in nature to the crisis of 'July', but this is much more final in tone as it registers the loss of the couple's last chance for happiness. The dim rainy day is described, poised on the edge of dusk, and in this brief interim between dusk and the fall of night the man and woman turn to each other. She smiles, and he thinks he sees some response in her eyes:



There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without!  
And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed—  
O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt  
Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!  
(VI, p. 65)

His happiness is as short-lived as the instant in which their eyes meet. The moment passes and the bond is lost. The speaker watches the woman, sitting still 'With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless'. This is the only description of her given in the lyrics and it is significant that it comes almost at the end of the sequence. The man has now given up the struggle at last and waits only for 'the world's redress'— death.

The year ends on a February day at noon with a description of an empty, wind-swept road representing both a journey's end and a journey's beginning. A farm-worker's lonely cottage is glimpsed in the distance, a rook whirling in the desolate air above. It is not clear whether the speaker addresses himself or his beloved, but I think it is more likely that he addresses himself. He is calm, patient at last with fate now that all craving has left him. He muses on the future, on the possibility that this day he experiences now will one day in the distant future (in 'some dawn of May') be remembered with desire. Life goes on and the desire for life is ongoing. Regardless of what happens to him he will continue to covet the pleasures and even the sorrows of past days, like this day when he wept. As the last lines of the sequence state, everything in the world is endless including both hope and pain in the calendar of love:

Shalt thou not hope for joy new born again,  
Since no grief ever born can ever die  
Through changeless change of seasons passing by?  
(VI p. 175)

## II: Half-Heard Melody The Fugitive Lyrics

### *Prelude: Publication and Privacy*

'And hoped his love would still hang vague and dim  
About my life like half-heard melody . . .'

The personal love lyrics of William Morris are like 'half-heard melody'; hauntingly resonant but difficult to trace and pin down. In the first place they are hard to locate physically: there is no single source of personal sonnets and songs and new lyrics may well keep appearing. In the second place these are very strange poems. Some seem to be exercises on familiar themes dealt with in *The Earthly Paradise* (particularly in the Seasonal Lyrics) while others are experimental, some are deeply personal, and some fragmentary and strained.

This section is divided into three parts. The first part deals with poems which William Morris published during his lifetime. Some of these poems were first published in periodicals, but all were collected in the late volume entitled *Poems by the Way* (1891). This was largely a grab-bag volume. According to May Morris:

The pieces in it were collected from various sources and are of very different periods and moods; some are lyrics from discarded unfinished narrative poems of quite early times; some were written "by the way," as a distraction in the midst of more important productions, while some, in later days were "made to order" for Socialist needs, and one or two turned out in that easy way the poet had at times, literally to lengthen the volume.

(IX, p. xxxiv)

I shall ignore the socialist and make-weight poems, dealing instead with the 'by the way' personal poems written in the midst of more time-consuming projects the most pressing of which was the writing and publication of *The Earthly Paradise* which took place from 1865-1870. In the second section of this sub-chapter I will deal with poems *not* published by William Morris in his lifetime but published after his death by May Morris. These are collected as 'Poems of the Earthly Paradise Period' in Volume XXIV of *Collected Works*. The third section will deal with a handful of poems which May Morris appears to have deliberately withheld from publication in *Collected Works*, but later published in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936).<sup>14</sup> In this section I will also

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<sup>14</sup> *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), volume I.

discuss a group of extremely personal poems which May Morris appears to have suppressed which have been published in journal articles over the past thirty years.

The value of studying personal poems may well be questioned. The practice of ascribing 'personal' meanings to a particular poem is, in itself, often problematic and the critic must endeavour to separate aesthetic value from biographical value. Some lyrics may reveal much about Morris's state of mind but could be perceived as unfinished or inferior works, yet other works as K. L. Goodwin and others have argued, are as mature and finished as many published poems but appear to have been withheld from publication purely because of their personal nature.<sup>15</sup>

Romantic assumptions will always be attached to the discovery of unpublished poems, especially love poems, and Morris's personal poems are fascinating because he was so reticent about his personal life. Morris's newest biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, has noted that Morris was unwilling to discuss family matters even with his own family.<sup>16</sup> Morris, more than any of the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, avoided discussing sexual love in his poetry in any way which could be interpreted as pertaining to himself. Many readers have noted the triangular relationships which occur in Morris's *The Lovers of Gudrun* and his unfinished novel, now published as *The Novel on Blue Paper*<sup>17</sup>, but these are all objective dramas written in the third person. Generally speaking, Morris avoided the introspective 'I' as much as possible. Through his very reluctance to write 'introspective' poems it is as if Morris only wrote these type of poems when he was under considerable emotional duress and the wear and tear of this duress is visible in the very fabric of the poem— they constantly veer between silence and confession, withdrawal

<sup>15</sup> K. L. Goodwin, 'Unpublished Lyrics of William Morris', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 5 (1975), pp. 190-206. Also see R. C. Ellison, 'An Unpublished Poem by William Morris', *English*, 15 (1964), pp. 100-02, and David DeLaura, 'An Unpublished Poem of William Morris', *Modern Philology*, 62 (1965), pp. 340-41.

<sup>16</sup> *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, p. 226.

<sup>17</sup> *The Novel on Blue Paper by William Morris*, ed. and introduced by Penelope Fitzgerald (London: The Journeyman Press, 1982).

from and affirmation of human love and of life itself. The poems with which I will deal throughout the next three sections become progressively more personal but the dilemma is always there for Morris: he is both attracted to and repulsed by the idea of introspective poetry.

(i) *Poems by the Way: The Public Lover*

'And my hand nigh touching thine,  
But not touching . . .'

Most of the poems which May Morris published as 'Poems by the Way' were published in a scattered form in magazines and periodicals before being cobbled together for the 1891 volume. They are thus nominally public poems but some also reveal concerns which emerge more fully in intensely confessional poems. The lovely 'From the Upland to the Sea', for example, like many of the personal lyrics has much in common with the Seasonal Lyrics. Throughout his personal lyrics Morris reveals a persistent preoccupation with the presence of two figures in a landscape. The two are not usually physically described, the male is the speaker who entreats some sort of response from the female which is rarely, if at all, forthcoming, and when it does come it is usually very brief indeed.

'From the Upland to the Sea' is a song from the unpublished tale of 'Orpheus' which was originally written for inclusion in *The Earthly Paradise*. Just as the landscape of the Seasonal Lyrics is consistently a finely detailed English village landscape, so too is the landscape of 'From the Upland to the Sea'. In the first half of this chapter I argued that the Seasonal Lyrics were set in a nineteenth-century village despite the archaic terminology with which Morris described flora and fauna. These archaic terms belonged to the English rural dialect of Morris's time and region. 'From the Upland to the Sea' is very similar to the Seasonal Lyrics in mood. The narrator, for instance, is perpetually suspended between happiness and melancholy:

Shall we make one morn of spring,  
Glad at heart of everything,  
Yet pensive with the thought of eve?

(IX, p. 93)

The narrator of the Seasonal Lyrics is perpetually 'pensive with the thought of eve', and here as in the Seasonal Lyrics a day is presented as the microcosm of a life, of all life. The narrator appears to be asking the perennial question: 'Can we be happy this day knowing that night is coming?' which is the same as 'Can we ever be happy when we know that we must die?' As in the Seasonal Lyrics, life is depicted as a journey undertaken by lovers who may or may not be estranged. The relationship between the lovers is always difficult to gauge, and here as in many of the lyrics, their hands come to symbolise their bodies. Morris frequently depicts the hand as a symbol of yearning—the wish to be united, and the hand clasp is often the prelude to a kiss. Here the compact is not quite made but the narrator is conscious of his love's proximity: 'my hand nigh touching thine, / But not touching'.

The lover's yearning towards the woman, his tentative approach and fear of rebuffal, is reflected in the movement of the verse itself. In Morris's Seasonal Lyrics and other more personal poems the speaker veers between silence and confession. The speaker's silence often takes the form of an immersion in reporting details of scenery, moving the focus of the poem to the flora, fauna or weather so that the man and woman in the landscape recede into the background. Then suddenly the focus moves to the man and the woman as the man makes some protestation, cry of despair, or rarely, a cry of joy.

It seems that the woman's continual silence drives the speaker into volubility through sheer frustration. Sometimes the man interprets the expression in the woman's eyes, her smile or her gestures as indicating a favourable response towards him but he usually 'reads' her incorrectly. The speaker continually hopes that the woman will respond to him lovingly, but almost every time he thinks he has achieved his goal and is consequently tempted to relieve his pent up emotion by fully confessing his love he finds that he is terribly mistaken and in order to salvage what pride he has left he must endeavour to give up hope and retreat once more into the comparative safety of silence. As another of the *Poems by the Way*, 'Echoes of Love's House' has it: ' "Love unlocks the lips that else

were ever dumb: / "Love locks up the lips whence all things good might come" '.

At some stage in the poem the careful reader will realise that 'From the Upland to the Sea' is not the description of an actual journey but is the fantasy of a projected journey. 'Shall we?' asks the narrator and proceeds to describe his fantasy. After sensing the nearness of her hand the narrator predicts:

As thou sittest, nor mayst speak,  
Nor mayst move the hand I kiss  
For the very depth of bliss;  
Nay, nor turn thine eyes to me.  
(IX, p. 93)

The man is imprisoning the woman in his fantasy so that she will keep still, without looking at him, and will allow him to kiss her hand. The passion figured as the 'desire of the great sea' is the speaker's passion only, for the woman may as well be a doll; she is being told what to do, how to respond to the landscape and her lover just as she is throughout the cycle of the Seasonal Lyrics. The poem is much stranger than it at first appears and seems very out of place as a song inserted into a retelling of the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. At the end of the poem the speaker breaks off in despair, or is it passionate fulfillment?:

And I weary more for thee  
Than if far apart we were,  
With a space of desert drear  
'Twixt thy lips and mine, O love!  
Ah, my joy, my joy thereof!  
(IX, p. 94)

It is a hopeless joy if it can only be realised in fantasy; the inarticulate moment of communion is fantasised by an unhappy narrator rather than experienced by a happy one.

Almost all of Morris's personal poems, including some of the Seasonal Lyrics, are about a failed communion between lovers in the landscape who must remain 'twain' and never find lasting union. 'Error and Loss' is a particularly poignant poem about lovers never achieving union. Published in *The Fortnightly* in 1871 as 'The Dark Wood', it was

originally included in Georgiana Burne-Jones's *A Book Of Verse* as 'Missing'.<sup>18</sup> The poem, a psychodrama, focuses on the narrator who sits in a forest weeping for some undefined but powerful sorrow. He is confronted by the figure of a girl who is searching for her lover. As they stare at each other it seems that the maiden absorbs the narrator's sorrow, apparently sucking it in through her eyes, but when she leaves he is alone with his sorrow once more. A man appears, on a similar quest to the maiden, then he too goes on his way. The poem recalls D. G. Rossetti's watercolour and ink sketch both entitled *How They Met Themselves* (1851/1860)<sup>19</sup> which depicts two lovers in a dark forest being confronted by their doppelgängers. The lovers in this poem have no doppelgängers and never actually meet each other, but the poem is imbued with a sense of foreboding similar to that conjured in Rossetti's pictures. 'Error and Loss' is also similar to Rossetti's 'Willowwood' sonnets in which separated lovers roam the netherworld in torment. Again, Morris echoes himself in this poem which reminds us of the many pairs of lovers in *The Earthly Paradise* who are separated and must search for each other and suffer much before they are permitted to be reunited. The most interesting figure in 'Error and Loss' is, of course, the speaker, and the puzzle of the poem is the source of his sorrow. Much of the sorrow of the first person narrators in Morris's lyrics seems to be an existential angst as well as a lament over love. At the end of this poem, alone with his sorrow, the speaker of 'Error and Loss' can no longer feel fully sorry for the lovers who keep 'missing' each other— instead he becomes self-pitying once more in a new way: 'Yet more with barren longing I grew weak / Yet more I mourned that I had none to seek'. His

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<sup>18</sup> It is the contention of many commentators that Morris was drawn to Georgiana Burne-Jones during the height of his wife's affair with Rossetti. At this time Edward Burne-Jones was in the midst of a lengthy and tempestuous affair with the Greek sculptress and model Maria Zambaco (nee Cassavetti) which lasted from 1867 to 1873. In 1870 Morris made a present for Georgiana of a small book of his own lyrics presented in calligraphic script with illuminations called *A Book of Verse*. Several of Morris's most personal poems derive from this source.

<sup>19</sup> See Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), volume 1, Cat. no. 118, volume 2, entry 182.

huge sorrow, then, results from either his loss of love or the fact that he has no love to lose.

'Hope Dieth: Love Liveth', a quite strange lyric, may have been originally designed to be inserted into a tale. Many poems, such as D. G. Rossetti's sonnets from *The House of Life*, personify abstract concepts such as 'hope' and 'love', 'truth' and 'pity' but here Morris makes abstractions out of human beings. The emotions conveyed by the speaker (presumably the dead or dying 'hope') to the living 'love' are extremely passionate and sad. Like the speakers of the Seasonal Lyrics and the Fugitive Lyrics the figure in 'Hope Dieth: Love Liveth' must reconcile himself to living on in pain, still bearing the love which once made he and his beloved happy:

Sighs rest thee not, tears bring no ease,  
Life hath no joy, and Death no peace:  
The years change not, though they decrease,  
For hope is dead, for hope is dead.  
(IX, p. 106)

Once again, the speaker's comments constitute an internal journey in which he directs the movements of his auditor, in this case addressed as 'love':

Draw near the place where once we stood  
Amid delight's swift-rushing flood,  
And we and all the world seemed good  
Nor needed hope now cold and dead.

Near the end of the poem the speaker confesses how pain over the loss of hope in love may be masked by other words, just as 'it' or 'hope', 'love', 'beauty' or 'memory' were interchangeable in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. As Morris writes:

"With other names do we name pain,  
The long years wear our hearts in vain . . .  
Full silent wayfarers we are . . ."  
(IX, p. 107)

For Morris's speakers, like Christina Rossetti's, pain must be assuaged as best as it can through the dignity of silence.



By way of contrast, 'Thunder in the Garden' is an evocative wish-fulfillment poem in which two lovers wander happily in a garden. It seems that this is the first instance of this kind of happiness that the couple have enjoyed in a very long time, as if at some stage the unnamed woman of all of the personal lyrics suddenly came alive. The poem allies a vast atmospheric change, thunder in the garden, with the sudden change in the woman. Usually remote, she suddenly smiles and the world is altered:

For her smile was of longing, no longer of glee,  
And her fingers, entwined with mine own,  
With caresses unquiet sought kindness of me  
For the gift that I never had known.  
(IX, p. 154)

This miraculous change is a sweet awakening to love that the speaker can scarcely believe: 'And I to myself was grown nought but a wonder':

That she craved for my lips that had craved her so often.  
And the hand that had trembled to touch,  
That the tears filled her eyes I had hoped not to soften  
In this world was a marvel too much.

This love is sensual and human, a tangible love: 'While our hands with each other were warm'. For the first time in these lyrics of pastoral division the woman seems real. Her feet sink into the wet grass, she bends her head to pass beneath a bower of roses and her 'arm with the lily was wet'. Now she leads rather than follows the speaker who has directed her responses in the Seasonal Lyrics and other *Poems by the Way*. She guides the man into the house and initiates sexual contact. The man is the very happy recipient of the woman's attentions registered in the last line of the poem with the effective inversion: 'And in the dark house was I loved'.

(ii) *Sonnets and Songs: The Private Lover*

'Go, then, poor rhymes, who know my heart indeed,  
And sing to her the words I cannot say . . .'

These are the poems which Morris chose not to publish in *Poems by the Way* (although some were published in magazines) which May Morris found fit to publish in Volume XXIV, the last of the *Collected Works*. At the time she had this to say about her editorial practice:

Some there are who think that nothing should go before the public that was not sanctioned by the writer, others that everything he left must be either published now— or burnt. To please myself in this matter has required some courage . . . Unless anything turns up again from some unexpected quarter, all my father's pieces of early date that have any quality of beauty or in any way throw light upon his character and ideas have been considered. The unpublished poems and fragments not here included have been described and quoted from, and there remains nothing more that we should wish to give to the world.  
(XXIV, p. xxvij)

However, eleven years later May Morris found more poems to 'give to the world' which she published in Volume 1 of *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, and following her death in 1938 some other lyrics of William Morris have appeared which are of undeniable value and most certainly throw light on his character and ideas.

The lyrics of *The Earthly Paradise* time published in Volume XXIV of *Collected Works*, 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame', 'May Grown A-Cold', 'As This Thin Thread' Song {'Twas one little word that wrought it'}, 'Why Dost Thou Struggle', 'O Far Away to Seek', 'Our Hands Have Met', and 'Fair Weather and Foul' form a far more consistent group than the poems which I have discussed from *Poems by the Way*. These poems are generally much more personal than the poems of Volume IX. As I mentioned in Part I of this chapter, William Morris did not write a sonnet sequence like Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* or D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*; instead he wrote the sequence of twelve reluctant love poems which I have called the Seasonal Lyrics and he also wrote the 'Fugitive Lyrics', scattered personal poems which all derive from one period in his life.

'Rhyme Slayeth Shame' was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in February 1870. It is difficult to believe that Morris published this poem, even in a fleeting form of publication, since it seems so personal

and he did not collect it for *Poems by the Way*. The title of the poem is vitally significant: Morris strongly implies that the act of casting thought and feeling into the form of a poem is in itself a distancing effect which will allow him to express that which he cannot express in speech. The whole poem is about silence and confession of love. The man must remain silent but he entrusts his poems with the task of communicating his love. His poems 'understand' his love, and can try to convey it: 'Go, then, poor rhymes, who know my heart indeed, / And sing to her the words I cannot say'. The speaker's poems will act as his emissaries in love:

If as I come unto her she might hear,  
If words might reach her when from her I go,  
Then speech a little of my heart might show,  
Because indeed nor joy nor grief nor fear  
Silence my love . . .  
(XXIV, p. 357)

Neither 'joy nor grief nor fear silence my love'. What then silences it? It seems that it is the attitude of the woman, the grey-eyed, distant woman who appears in all these lyrics, that silences the man's avowals. Her glance 'truer than truth' stills his utterance. Perhaps this is because the 'truth' that he reads in this glance is her lack of reciprocal love. In many respects this is a poem in the courtly tradition. The man is the shy admirer who cannot or dare not confess his love to his lady, but he is still insistent; his love will not die and he must communicate it even at the risk of rejection. Unlike the man of the Seasonal Lyrics and the other pastoral cum personal poems who directs the woman's responses, the man of 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame' in courtly fashion wishes to follow his lady everywhere. The man may not be able to 'follow' the woman wherever she goes, but if he sends her his poems his words may follow her. 'And how I follow where her footsteps lead' may also indicate his willingness to accede to her desires: whether she responds to his advances or repels him, he will follow her example. He asks his verses to

. . . tell her of my need,  
And how I follow where her footsteps lead,  
Until the veil of speech death draws away.  
(XXIV, p. 357)

Speech is a veil which distorts the reality of the love that the speaker is able to apprehend directly but cannot communicate in words because he is afraid, or because words cannot properly convey his experience.

It would be very interesting to know what Jane Morris thought of this poem and others like it. Jane Morris often made copies of Morris's poems in her own hand; she may have been an 'ignorant scribe' or she may have paid careful attention to everything she wrote down.<sup>20</sup> If this is the case then there is some reason to suppose that Morris deliberately wrote many poems to catch her attention and 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame' is one of these— it literally casts a message to Jane.

The sonnet 'May Grown A-Cold' was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1870 one month after 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame'. Like the octave of an earlier poem 'Sad-Eyed and Soft and Grey' the tone at the beginning of 'May Grown A-Cold' is at first joyous and celebratory then the 'turn' comes. The turn does not come with the waking from a dream, but rather from some vast philosophical shock. The joy of the first part of the poem is almost hysterical in its exuberance:

Straighten the crooked paths and right the wrong,  
And tangle bliss so that it tarry long.  
Go cry aloud the hope the Heavens do say!  
(XXIV, p. 358)

The narrator appears to be speaking to himself, chiding himself for thinking he could be happy:

Nay what is this? and wherefore lingerest thou?  
Why sayest thou the sky is hard as stone?  
Why sayest thou the thrushes sob and moan?  
Why sayest thou the east years bloom and bough?  
Why seem the sons of man so hopeless now?  
Thy love is gone, poor wretch, thou art alone!  
(XXIV, p. 358)

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<sup>20</sup> Many of the unpublished lyrics of William Morris owned by the Society of Antiquaries of London exist in fair copies made by Jane Morris. See K. L. Goodwin, 'Unpublished Lyrics of William Morris', pp. 195 & 197.

This passionate ending is familiar from the Seasonal Lyrics. There is a sudden pause followed by a torrent of self-directed questions. Morris's lyrics are, after all, ultimately self-directed. Perhaps he intended Jane to interpret some of them as message to herself, perhaps others are messages to Georgiana Burne-Jones, or perhaps, after all, they are fictional. Some of the poems included in *A Book of Verse* can certainly be construed as veiled appeals to Georgiana Burne-Jones's sympathy, understanding, and quite possibly love, but for the most part Morris's love poetry like Christina Rossetti's and D. G. Rossetti's is self-directed since it is poetry about an individual's attempt to salvage what remains of the self in the wake of the failure of love. Morris, like Christina Rossetti and D. G. Rossetti, constantly rehearses the question of how to live without the desired sexual relationship while the longing for that relationship persists. In Morris's love poetry the lover, the natural world, happiness and misery (usually called 'joy' and 'bliss') are more closely bound together than they are in the love poetry of Christina Rossetti or D. G. Rossetti. Christina Rossetti uses flower imagery but her landscapes are not often particularised, they are usually remote faerylands populated by maidens. However, D. G. Rossetti uses the landscape in a way similar to Morris, as a mood-ridden, atmospheric plane in which lovers co-exist whilst they try to attain the sort of fulfillment which D. G. Rossetti famously evoked in 'Silent Noon':

Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass, —  
 The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:  
 Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms  
 'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.  
 All around our nest, far as the eye can pass,  
 Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge  
 Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.  
 'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.

Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly  
 Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky: —  
 So this wing'd hour is dropt to us from above.  
 Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
 This close-companioned inarticulate hour  
 When twofold silence was the song of love.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 81. Hereafter referred to as *Works*. All subsequent references to poems by D. G. Rossetti will be cited parenthetically by page numbers after quotations in the text.

This is the perfect hour of peace and silence experienced by two lovers in an idyllic English rural landscape for which Morris's poet-singers longed. Both the dearth of love and its fulfillment result in silence. The confession of unrequited love is a pointless experience, a purging of tension rather than a mutual celebration, whilst happiness in love encourages silence as words are superfluous: the experience itself is enough. Still this perfect 'inarticulate' experience is articulated by D. G. Rossetti in the form of a poem: the act of 'speaking' in the making of a poem frames the perfect experience of silence.

Morris's pastoral poems are seldom as visually stimulating as 'Silent Noon'. With its exotic but apt similes— the tips of the woman's fingers spiking the grass like 'rosy blooms' and the dragonfly pictured as an embroidered emblem (a 'blue thread loosened from the sky'— D. G. Rossetti's poem is very painterly. Morris, who distrusted his talent as a painter but became a multi-media designer, is rarely pictorial in his personal lyrics although the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* have often been compared to tapestry. The lyrics have a 'shadowy', even ghostly quality; the atmosphere they conjure up is sensuous but vague: scents of flowers or crops are carried in the breeze along with far-distant sounds of church bells from the village. Morris's pastoral poems are set in an Edenic world; Edenic because there are only two people in the whole world in these poems, a man and a woman. The poems may have a nineteenth century rural setting but for all intents and purposes the two people in the poem could be the only two people in the world. When the speaker of 'May Grown A-Cold' cries out 'Thy love is gone, poor wretch, thou art alone!' it is a true statement. There is no one else in the world but these lovers. Bereft of the love of the woman, the speaker is bereft of everything.

Like 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame', 'As This Thin Thread' plays with courtly conventions. Morris's speaker is the humble, forgotten lover who prays that his love may be not be entirely disregarded as it is a thing

of some worth and may come to be appreciated when it has further stood the test of time:

As this thin thread upon thy neck shall lie  
So on thy heart let me poor love abide  
No noted much, and yet not cast aside . . .  
(XXIV, p. 359)

The 'thin thread' could be a necklace of some kind, a chain which may be the gift of the speaker. This speaker's love may undergo many trials: 'For it may be that fear and mockery / And shame, earth's tyrants, the thin thing shall try'. There is a possibility in this poem that the speaker is being bitter in his responses to his lady's indifference. He continually describes his love as a poor, worthless thing and seems to be accusing the woman of, perhaps through her indifference to his love, constructing a heavy emotional burden which he must wear:

Then hearken! thou who forgest day by day  
No chain, but armour that I needs must wear  
Although at whiles I deem it hard to bear,  
If thou to thine own work no hand will lay,  
That which I took I may not cast away,  
Keep what I give till Death our eyes shall clear.  
(XXIV, p. 359)

This 'armour' could be the woman's behaviour, an infidelity perhaps which pains the speaker so that he must harden himself against it. He implies that it is in her power to remove this burden but she refuses to do so: 'If thou to thine own work no hand will lay'. As in 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame' the 'gift' of love is permanent. He hopes that in death his love will be vindicated by the woman's appreciation of him: 'Keep what I give till Death our eyes shall clear'.

'Rhyme Slayeth Shame' and 'As This Thin Thread' might be called semi-confessions. They stop just short of full avowal because in both poems the man is wary of the woman's reception of his confidence: he tests the waters by humbly offering proofs of his love as a 'poor' and insignificant thing. The speaker does not want the 'weight' of his love to fall too heavily on the woman so that she will be burdened by it and therefore reject it outright. Song ('Twas one little word that wrought it')

is about the moment of confession where the speaker risks all by telling his love. The opening of the poem focuses on the gap between silence and confession, the threshold, or abyss upon which the speaker's lips tremble:

Long 'twixt heart and lips it hung  
Till too sore the heart was wrung,  
Till no more the lips might bear  
To be parted, yet so near . . .  
(XXIV, p. 360)

The utterance of 'one little word' is the cause of a momentous disaster. Given confidence by some incident in which he felt that he and the woman had drawn close once again he confesses: 'Then I cried out, Ah, I move thee / And thou knowest that I love thee', but this avowal is a mistake because there is no reciprocation. The speaker was misled by his own love which caused him to misconstrue the woman so far that he thought her capable of returning his love and he thus uttered the dangerous 'one little word'. He appears to reproach the woman for false pretences, for perhaps enjoying his show of love without feeling anything in return. He thinks that her behaviour, her eyes, her words have encouraged him to confess:

Yea, it pleased her to behold me  
Mocked by tales that love had told me,  
Mocked by tales and mocked by eyes  
Wells of loving mysteries;  
Mocked by eyes and mocked by speech  
Till I deemed I might beseech  
For one word, that scarcely speaking  
She would snatch me from that waking,  
*Half forgotten, unforgiven and alone.*  
(XXIV, p. 360, Morris's italics)

But she has rejected him. At the end of the poem, as at the end of 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame', all speech between would-be lover and the woman is over and he must remain silent forever: 'Silence of love that cannot sing again', as Christina Rossetti put the matter at the very end of *Monna Innominata*. Here Morris writes:

No more speech till all is over



Twixt the well-beloved and lover  
Half-forgotten, unforgiven and alone.

Like Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* and *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* and D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*, Morris's Seasonal Lyrics and Fugitive Lyrics are essentially elegiac. Although they were not designed as a deliberate sequence, in the Fugitive Lyrics the same persona seems to be speaking, the persona of a man who has searched for meaning through love but has been rejected by the woman he loves so that in the end all he is left with is silence.

'Why Dost Thou Struggle' is clearly one of the most fascinating of the personal poems published by May Morris. It was a brave move on May Morris's part to publish a poem which could be easily interpreted as casting aspersions on her mother. The poem shows the slave mistress's response to the slave. This woman has sometimes been described as sounding like Morris's Guenevere, perhaps this is because she demonstrates some skill in self-justification. The poem begins with the male voice asking:

Why dost thou struggle, strive for victory  
Over my heart that loveth thine so well?  
When Death shall one day have its will of thee  
And to deaf ears thy triumph thou must tell.  
(XXIV, p. 362)

Once more the speaker believes the story of his love will be 'told' after both their deaths when the woman may be able to make a speech but there will be no auditor. There is a little anger, a little sarcasm in the speaker's query. This poem is a judgment of the man's 'poor' love from the woman's point of view as imagined by the man who has bestowed this love. Much of the poem is told in the imagined voice of the woman, the woman who cannot reciprocate the man's love but cannot quite dispense with it either. This woman seems like Guenevere—egotistical and cruel. Although she does not and cannot return the man's love, she finds his love comforting and flattering:

I wore a mask, because though certainly  
I loved him not, yet was there something soft

And sweet to have him ever loving me . . . .

And hoped his love would still hang vague and dim  
About my life like half-heard melody.  
(XXIV, p. 362)

She finds this love comforting because she too has her own sorrow,  
another love:

I knew of love  
But my love and not his; how could I tell  
That such blind passion in him I should move?  
Behold I have loved faithfully and well . . .  
(CW, Volume XXIV, p. 363)

The controlling speaker analyses the psychology of the woman's lack of love for him. At times the poem is bitchy and accusatory, at other times it is simply sympathetic to the woman's point of view. The poem resembles *The Defence of Guenevere* in places, but only if the portrait of Guenevere were to be imagined as being written by King Arthur. Here the lady's victim writes her history.

The speaker's love, characterised as a poor thin thing in the earlier poem, is here characterised as childish and greedy while the cause of the remoteness in the woman who has appeared in many of these poems is at last defined as love for another man. She has encouraged the first man's love in part because it 'pleased her pride' and in part because it soothed her sorrow, and she pretended to herself that she did not realise the precise nature of his affection:

But now my heart grown silent of its grief  
Saw more than kindness in his hungry eyes:  
But I must wear a mask of false belief  
And feign that nought I knew his miseries.  
(XXIV, p. 362)

Ironically, the silence of her grief has encouraged speech in the man she does not love, although she may even have come close at times, or so she tells herself, to loving him:

Belike it is I well-nigh loved him oft —  
Nigh loved him oft, and needs must grant to him

Some kindness out of all he asked of me . . .

Perhaps it was during one of these times when she felt especially fond of him that the man of Song {'Twas one little word'} made his unfortunate confession. Although she may be self-deceiving and manipulative the woman in 'Why Dost Thou Struggle' expresses some compassion for her conquest. She has repaid the man's doglike, pathetic devotion with a little kindness which he has misunderstood; she is thereby forced to draw further away from him than ever before. Her kind looks and kind speech will cease but she claims that this is not her fault— it is because she loves someone else. She ends with an invocation of her grand, deep love: 'Love of my love so deep and measureless / O lords of the new world this too ye know', an ending which reinforces the hopelessness of the controlling speaker's situation.

Throughout the Seasonal Lyrics and the other pastoral love poems in which the woman is silent and estranged whilst the man pleads and protests in her presence there is the sense that at some time they were happier; at some time in the past her look, her hand clasp, her kisses were freely given but now she is no longer available to the man. In 'Our Hands Have Met' this is clearly the case; an intimacy once possessed has been lost forever, the man can remember past happiness but the woman apparently cannot. According to most accounts, the Morris marriage was a happy one for some years:

Our hands have met, our lips have met,  
Our souls— who knows when the wind blows  
How light souls drift mid longing set,  
If thou forget'st, can I forget  
The time that was not long ago?  
(CW, Volume XXIV, p. 365)

Significantly, the woman 'was not silent then, but told / Sweet secrets dear'. She confessed secrets to the man, she trembled and her cheek burned, whether because of embarrassment or sexual excitement it is difficult to tell. At this stage in their relationship she has 'kind words' just as she did in 'Why Dost Thou Struggle'. The man countenances the

possibility that the woman will be relieved when his love, a 'passing fancy' is over:

Wilt thou be glad upon the day  
When unto me this love shall be  
An idle fancy passed away,  
And we shall meet and smile [and] say  
"O wasted sighs of long ago!"

At the end of the poem the speaker intends to live on, cold and alone but not forgetting the past, although he refers to this in a confusing double negative which draws attention to the precious quality of those lost days: 'I live on yet, / Forgetting still that I forget / The priceless days of long ago?'

The last of the poems of *The Earthly Paradise* period included in Volume XXIV of *Collected Works*, 'Fair Weather and Foul', could be imagined as the author's reaction to his own love poetry. He instructs himself: 'Speak nought, move not, but listen, the sky is full of gold'. In an attempt to forget the past and all its painful memories he seeks solace in the surrounding landscape: 'Joy that may not be spoken fills mead and flower and tree'. He tells himself: 'Be silent' and 'Hope not to tell thy story'. The world is at once beautiful and a source of succour, but it is blithely independent of man and immortal in a way that man cannot be. 'Fair Weather and Foul' is about the speaker's moment of silent communion with himself, the 'inarticulate hour' is here perfected but without a partner. The man has finally learned to be alone and to experience pain; this is a resting point in which all memories and hopes coalesce. Soon he will once more tell the story of his pain, 'the tuneful woe', but here is his period of respite.

### (iii) 'Poet's Unrealities': *The Hidden Lover*

'Till face to face this verse and sorrow meet . . .'

These are the most hidden of Morris's poems: poems suppressed by both he and May Morris. May Morris relented over some of the poems she

had initially hidden and published them near the end of her life in *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Volume I, although, as she had written many years earlier, she was aware that

No one felt more keenly than my father the wrong done to dead authors by gathering together every fragment of their writing regardless of quality . . .  
(I, p. xv)

Other lyrics have since been published by David J. DeLaura and R. C. Ellison, but the most significant publication has been K. L. Goodwin's reproduction of unpublished lyrics in *The Yearbook of English Studies* in 1975.

In 'Poems of *The Earthly Paradise* Period' in *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, one love poem is of particular interest: 'Near But Far Away'. The sonnet, 'Near but Far Away' is a passionate treatment of themes familiar from the Seasonal and Fugitive Lyrics. Once again we are presented with a grey-eyed woman. This woman seemed startled into tears by hearing of the man's unhappiness. Touched by her sympathy, he is perhaps about to confess his love to her as he did in Song {'Twas one little word'} but the outcome is more promising here: she silences him with a kiss. I will quote the poem in full:

She wavered, stopped and turned, methought her eyes,  
The deep grey windows of her heart, were wet,  
Methought they softened with a new regret  
To note in mine unspoken miseries,  
And as a prayer from out my heart did rise  
And struggled on my lips in shame's strong net,  
She stayed me, and cried 'Brother!' our lips met,  
Her dear hands drew me into Paradise.

Sweet seemed that kiss till thence her feet were gone,  
Sweet seemed the word she spake, while it might be  
As wordless music — But the truth fell on me,  
And kiss and word I knew, and, left alone,  
Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone,  
While at my back there beat a boundless sea.  
(*Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, pp. 538-9)

The abrupt opening of the poem: 'She wavered, stopped and turned' indicates that the woman was about to leave but turns back either to speak or silently sympathise. As in the earlier poems such as 'Rhyme

Slayeth Shame' and 'Twas one little word' the confession of love is characterised as 'shame'. A shameful struggle between reticence and admission takes place on the speaker's lips. In Morris's lyrics lips have this ambiguity; they are the place of shame, of words, but they are also the place of the kiss, of contact and union. The 'warring' impulse in Pre-Raphaelite love poetry between silence and confession here becomes a full-scale battle, but the perilous 'word' is not uttered— instead the man and woman kiss. This kiss seems 'sweet' only for a very short time. The woman soon leaves as does his memory of her words: 'Sweet seemed the word she spake, while it might be / As wordless music'. Perhaps the word she spoke was like wordless music, comforting to his senses but with no meaning that he could readily understand? On her departure he is trapped into facing some truth which he has momentarily avoided: 'Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone, / While at my back there beat a soundless sea'.

In 1965 David DeLaura published an interesting personal lyric of William Morris. Since the only published version of the poem is in DeLaura's article, I will reproduce the poem in full below:

LONELY LOVE AND LOVELESS DEATH

O have I been hearkening  
To some dread newcomer?  
What chain is it bindeth,  
What curse is anigh  
That the world is a-darkening  
Amidmost the summer,  
That the soft sunset blindeth,  
And death standeth by?

Doth it wane, is it going,  
Is it gone by forever,  
The life that seemed round me,  
The longing I sought?  
Has it turned to undoing  
That constant endeavour,  
To bind love that bound me  
To hold all it brought?

I beheld, till beholding  
Grew pain thrice told over;  
I hearkened till hearing  
torment  
Grew ~~anguish~~ past speech;  
I dreamed of enfolding

Arms blessing the lover,  
Till the dream past all bearing  
The dark void did reach.

Beaten back, ever smitten  
With pain that none knoweth,  
Did love ever languish  
Did hope ever die?  
I know not, but litten  
By the light that love showeth  
She was mine through all anguish,  
Never lost, never nigh.

I know not: but never  
The day was without her;  
I know not: but morning  
Still woke me to her;  
All miles that might sever,  
All faces about her,  
Weary days and self-scorning—  
Ah [All?] easy to bear.

Look back, while grown colder  
The sunless day lingers,  
And the tree tops are stirring  
With the last wind of day!  
If thou didst behold her,  
If thine hand held her fingers,  
If her breath thou wert hearing,  
What words wouldst thou say?

Words meet for the hearkening  
Of death the newcomer:  
For the new bond that bindeth,  
The new pain anigh —  
For the world is a-darkening  
Amidmost the summer,  
Death sickeneth & blindeth,  
No love standeth by.<sup>22</sup>

DeLaura found this poem confusing, for instance he was not sure what to make of the 'thou' of stanza six: 'Is the poet addressing himself? Or is it some assumed addressee (or the "reader")?'<sup>23</sup> Goodwin seems to have satisfactorily solved this dilemma by reading the poem as a personal

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<sup>22</sup> As reproduced in David J. DeLaura, 'An Unpublished Poem', p. 340 from a copy held at the Miriam Lutchter Stark Library of the University of Texas at Austin. Copyright Society of Antiquaries of London.

<sup>23</sup> DeLaura, p. 341.

statement addressed to Georgiana Burne-Jones since the poem was included in *A Book of Verse* and never published elsewhere.<sup>24</sup>

DeLaura believed that the reason the poem was never published was that it was intensely personal and Goodwin amplifies DeLaura's hypothesis. Goodwin argues that the poem concerns Morris's grief over the failure of his 'ideal love-relationship'. Goodwin then goes on to say that

... he is presumably speaking about the deterioration in his relationship with his wife. If this is so, it would seem natural for him, in stanza six, to turn directly to the addressee of the poem. Georgiana Burne-Jones was thoroughly aware of the situation, had known the Morrisises well for almost the whole of their married life, and was having her own marital troubles at the time. In his anguish Morris asks her what she would say to Jane Morris if she were in his situation.<sup>25</sup>

'Lonely Love and Loveless death' is certainly one of the most emphatic and intensely felt poems about suffering and loss of love that Morris ever wrote. It combines *leitmotifs* from the Seasonal Lyrics and Fugitive Lyrics such as one day as the microcosm of life and a dawn of love eventually leading to a cold evening of lovelessness, but there is far less pastoral observation used as a means of deflecting the personal in this poem than in any of the others which use pastoral descriptions. The emotion is all important: the day and the weather correspond to the central situation between the lovers instead of diverting attention away from it.

'Lonely Love and Loveless Death' is imbued with the dread of the loss of love which is figured in mysterious terms as an 'it' akin to the 'it' in Christina Rossetti's poems:

O have I been hearkening  
To some dread newcomer?  
What chain is it bindeth,  
What curse is anigh . . . .

Doth it wane, is it going,  
Is it gone by forever . . . ?

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<sup>24</sup> Goodwin, p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> Goodwin, p. 192.



Here life and love are equated as the 'it' which the speaker desperately wishes to retain but which he must hopelessly watch being destroyed. He watches and hears the onslaught until the horror of it makes him unable to speak in protest: 'I hearkened till hearing / Grew torment (anguish) past speech'. He looks back on the past, asking how could he have changed the outcome of events. He asks either himself or Georgiana 'what words wouldst thou say', as if words could have prevented his loss. These are 'Words meet for the hearkening / Of death the newcomer'. Death then is the newcomer feared in the first stanza, the death that in the other personal poems like 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame', 'As This Thin Thread', and Song ('Twas one little word that wrought it') he hoped would vindicate his love.

The only unpublished poems more saliently personal than 'Lonely Love and Loveless Death' are the seven or so poems which Goodwin reproduces towards the end of his article.<sup>26</sup> The most significant of these is one which, if Goodwin's arguments are accepted, can confidently be cited as the most autobiographical of all known poems by William Morris. This poem 'Alone unhappy by the fire I sat' exists in a fair copy made by Jane Morris. More than any of Morris's personal lyrics it would be very interesting to know what Jane Morris made of this poem which seems to speak so clearly about the interrelationship of Morris, Jane and D. G. Rossetti.

In the first stanza Morris's speaker refers to the task of such personal poetry, as he did in 'Rhyme Slayeth Shame', in venting inner feelings. He speaks of the conjunction of poetry and pain thus: 'Till face to face this verse and sorrow meet'. He had realised that his words in poetry will have to confront the silence of his experience—literally art meets reality.

Current biographical knowledge explains the poem almost perfectly. The first four stanzas of the poem are, admittedly, open to non-biographical treatment. Here the speaker experiences a grim nostalgia about the old hopes of the past. He had hoped that before they die (an

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<sup>26</sup> The unpublished lyrics of William Morris discussed hereafter are reproduced in Appendix B courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

unspecified 'we') things might have improved between them. This could be interpreted as the oft-reiterated hope of an improved relationship between the man and the silent woman of the personal lyrics, mostly probably of course Morris and his wife Jane. The speaker thinks of the past and tries to imagine a more hopeful future but finds himself unable to come up with a convincing vision of renewed happiness. In the second stanza Morris echoes the 'idle singer of an empty day' song from *The Earthly Paradise* in which the voice of the storyteller declares his weakness:

Of heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,  
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,  
Or make quick-coming death a little thing . . .  
(III, p. 1)

It is a self parody of a man who can write books, tell tales, but not change anything for the better in his personal life. In 'Alone unhappy by the fire I sat' the speaker self-consciously confronts his task as a poet. He says: 'Of shifts from grief to joy we poets sing / And of the long days make a little thing'. He has the power to transmute our experience of time through poetry of entertainment or comfort, but he cannot do this for himself. Stanza three is a heartfelt exploration of lasting pain and disappointment:

But grief meseems is like eternity  
While our hearts ache and far-off seems the rest  
If we are not content that all should die  
That we so fondly once unto us pressed  
Unless our love for folly be confessed  
And we stare back with cold and wondering eyes  
On the burnt rags of our fool's paradise.

This stanza has a direct echo of Song ('Twas one little word') wherein the 'fire' of the speaker's love, as he mistakenly thinks, has awoken 'in her some hidden flame / And the rags of pride and shame / She seemed casting from her heart'. In 'Alone unhappy' the speaker interprets the destruction of his cherished image of the love of the past as a delusion: 'And we stare back with cold and wondering eyes / On the burnt rags of our fool's paradise'. This phrase also recalls the destruction of Christina Rossetti's airy pleasure palace and the digging up of her 'gardens of my

soul'. In the fourth stanza a biographical reading becomes tempting when it seems that Morris has heard lurid gossip about Edward Burne-Jones's affair with Maria Zambaco and feels great pity for Georgiana Burne-Jones's suffering:

And in mine eyes there rang some piteous tale  
And all my heart for very pain did fail  
To think of thine; I cannot bridge the space  
Twixt what may be and thy sad weary face.

The last two lines of this stanza are particularly significant; the speaker declares that he is unable to 'bridge the space' or gap between what he can say by way of comfort in the light of the sorrow reflected in the other's face— nothing he can say or do can change things.

At the fifth stanza the focus of the poem moves to its addressee. Here Morris characterises the auditor, perhaps Georgiana, disdainfully lifting her eyebrow at him as he, perhaps clumsily, tries to express his pity and compassion for her hurt and humiliation. The speaker must have received sympathy and understanding from this person, 'my helper in the dark', which he longs to return in kind. The auditor seems to be the speaker's only reminder of a happier past now that all is altered in his life: 'For you alone unchanged now seem to be / A real thing left of the days sweet to me'.

As in the poems of avowal discussed earlier he is again tempted to speak of love:

... my lips  
Must leave the words unsaid my heart will say  
While I grow hot, and o'er the edge there slips  
A word that makes me tremble and I stay  
With fluttering heart the thoughts that will away.

His heart longs to confess but his lips must leave these words unsaid. The battle between silence and confession again teeters on the 'edge' of articulation and in this trembling there is a slippage: a word escapes which must be smoothed over in terms of daily social intercourse and not spoken of again:

We meet, we laugh and talk but still is set

A seal o'er thing I never can forget

But must not speak of . . .

Here in the last two stanzas of the poem Morris gives a vignette of one of many nights in which Rossetti went out with Jane and Morris saw them off:

. . . still I count the hours  
That bring my friend to me, with hungry eyes  
I watch him as his feet the staircase mount  
Then face to face we sit, a wall of lies  
Made hard by fear and faint anxieties  
Is drawn between us, and he goes away  
And leaves me wishing it were yesterday.

Then when they both are gone, I sit alone  
And turning foolish triumph's pages o'er  
And think how it would be if they were gone  
Not to return, or worse if the time bore  
Some seed of hatred, in its fiery core  
And nought of praise were left to me to gain  
But the poor [            ] we walked of as so vain.

'Then face to face we sit, a wall of lies' is reminiscent of 'Near but Far Away' in which 'Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone'. In biographical terms the wall of stone could refer to Rossetti's unwanted presence in Morris's life as his wife's lover and housemate or it could just refer to the metaphorical wall of lies between them.

In the haste of transcription a word has been omitted from the text. If not for 'walked' the conclusion may have been assumed to be 'But the poor fame we talked of as so vain' which would certainly fit the circumstances of Morris's friendship with Rossetti and the reference to Morris's works indicated in 'turning foolish triumph's pages o'er'. The end of the poem is virulent in its approach to venting hatred when the speaker briefly imagines how he would feel if the man and woman were never to return.

The most interesting part of the poem, and the most convincing reason for giving the poem a biographical reading, lies in the notes for continuation which I have reproduced along with the poem in Appendix B. These notes may refer to the mutual unhappiness of Morris and

Georgiana Burne-Jones: 'we are in the same box / and need conceal nothing . . . shame in confessing ones / real feelings'. At last Morris's speaker has said outright what he has hinted at in many poems— that he feels shame in confessing his real feelings. It may never be known if a completed version of this poem was sent. Morris may have characteristically felt 'shame in confessing ones / real feelings' and suppressed a final draft of the poem, or perhaps he was simply unable to finish it since it was so very 'introspective'.

A far more finished poem, revealing in a different way than 'Alone unhappy by the fire I sat', is 'Everlasting Spring'. Goodwin interprets the poem as 'an honest and magnanimous recognition of the situation between Morris and his wife'<sup>27</sup>— Morris recognises that his wife does not love him and that she loves someone else. In this poem the speaker is very tender and loving towards 'Love that cannot love me'— the estranged woman. The most personal reference in the poem comes in the fourth stanza: 'Nought has changed us mid those blossoms, but the breath of happiness, / As on earth am I ungainly, and thou sweet and delicate'. Morris was certainly ungainly but Jane was considered quite tall for a Victorian woman (any Victorian woman over 5 foot 6 inches was considered tall) with long hands and feet, perhaps delicate in comparison with Morris but Georgiana Burne-Jones was absolutely tiny. If autobiographical, as this poem seems to be, this poem could easily be read as an address to Georgiana Burne-Jones rather than Jane Morris. Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones may perhaps have kissed at some time in the past. In 'Our Hands Have Met' the woman addressed in the past has not been silent but has 'told sweet secrets', and shamefacedly blushing, has allowed the man to kiss her cheek. The speaker refers to events which took place in 'that far off country', which I take to mean the past in which, as in 'Our Hands Have Met', the woman is embarrassed and with burning cheeks shamefully admits some secret, kissing the man on the cheek whilst his un-kissed lips long to kiss her lips. But this moment in

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<sup>27</sup> Goodwin, p. 203.

both poems seems a long past epiphany enshrined in his memory but now unobtainable in reality.

On a cursory reading, 'Everlasting Spring' seems a happy poem until the reader realises that all the happiness of the poem: the unity, the hand clasps, the kisses, are all of the past. The two will forever be 'twain' though the man would give up everything for the unity of the past. This is the subject of another of the unpublished lyrics: 'Three chances and one answer' which describes how the speaker of the poem would give up everything, even rebirth into a new and happy life, for unity with the beloved. The first stanza reads:

O love, if all the pleasures that the earth  
Can give one life, if new and happy birth  
Were given me now, how could I weigh their worth  
If low and soft thy sweet voice spake to me  
"We, who were twain, one loved soul let us be".

Goodwin states that there is an ambiguity surrounding the state of the beloved in this poem. He argues that she may be dead, but I can see no reason for thinking this. The woman is not dead, she is simply silent and unresponsive: 'And now that thou art silent, and thine eyes / Must turn no more to these my miseries'. This woman is the remote, impassive woman whose silent presence is felt in the Seasonal Lyrics and many other personal lyrics. The man's dream that she might one day ask for their reunion is, as he acknowledges, a vain fantasy.

Another poem, closely connected to 'Three chances and one answer', is 'Thy lips that I have touched no more may speak' which depicts a woman who, in Goodwin's words, is 'dead to the poet's love',<sup>28</sup> but yet seems to pity him. The speaker refers constantly to the woman's 'ruth' as if she has comforted him in the past, in words both uttered and written, over his love which she cannot return. It is a conciliatory poem in which he praises the woman for her love and pity. In the dramatic ending he seems to say that he would not change her if he could, but he

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<sup>28</sup> Goodwin, p. 204.

reveals his vulnerability to pain and his real wish for some other response from her in the last line:

But midst thy ruth think not of me as one  
To curse the sun that yesterday it shone  
To wish the light of all my day undone  
And yet— thy pity O sweet love and Ruth!

The last of the personal poems published by Goodwin is considered by him to be an address to Georgiana Burne-Jones in which Morris protests against those who would construe his love for her as merely lust. The poem appears to be structurally incomplete but is nevertheless suggestive. The speaker casts a broadside at those who would interpret his love in base terms:

The world perchance to mock and jest would turn  
My love for thee, and ask what I desire  
Or with the name of some unholy fire  
Would name the thing wherewith my heart doth yearn . . .

The speaker seems to admit that he too has been through the phase of seeing his love as lust, but through the woman's guidance he has escaped this dangerous place and moved on to safer, more proper climes:

But I now clinging to thy skirts pass through  
The dangerous pleasant place with halfshut eyes  
And with new names I name old miseries  
And turned to hopes are many fears I knew  
And things I spoke seem coming true  
Since thou has shown me where the high heaven lies —

He appears to have been counselled out of despair and forlorn hope into a newer understanding of his situation. He has escaped the toils of lust through clinging to the skirt of the woman and he is now safely out of his fixation of the past, saved not by lust, but by loving friendship which has helped him to reinterpret the past, then let it go.

Goodwin concludes:

Morris, denied passionate reciprocation by his wife, the woman to whom he had directed all his romantic longings and hopes, forbidden to express devotion and love to the woman who had comforted him in the collapse of his romantic dreams, had only

his verse in which to give expression to the turbulent emotions of his heart.<sup>29</sup>

After the 'stormy years' of *The Earthly Paradise* time Morris no longer felt the need to quell in verse 'the turbulent emotions of his heart'.

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<sup>29</sup> Goodwin, p. 206.



## Chapter Three

### Love's Last Gift

#### The Poetry of D. G. Rossetti

#### The House of Grief

##### A Sonnet Sequence

'This "House of Life" has in it so many mansions . . . '

— A. C. Swinburne



UST as William Morris's Seasonal Lyrics began as pastoral poems and gradually turned into love poems so D. G. Rossetti's *House of Life* undergoes a change; it begins as a House of Love and makes a gradual but radical metamorphosis into a House of Grief.

Rossetti wrote three 'Houses of Life': the arrangement published in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1869 under the heading 'Of Life, Love, and Death: Sixteen Sonnets', the fifty sonnets and eleven songs headed 'Sonnets and Songs: Towards a Work to be called "The House of Life"' published in *Poems* (1870), and finally, the complete *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, consisting of 101 sonnets<sup>1</sup> divided into two sections entitled 'Youth and Change' and 'Change and Fate', published in *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881).<sup>2</sup> The 1869 sequence was a gloomy one. Opening with the 'Willowwood' quartet it also included the insomniac piece 'Sleepless Dreams' and the anguished philosophical sonnets 'Lost on Both Sides', 'A Superscription', 'The Landmark' and 'Lost Days'. The 1870 version is very different indeed: there is a mix of love sonnets and philosophical sonnets but the love sonnets, which are celebratory in tone, tend to determine the mood of the whole piece which ends with eleven songs the bulk of which are love lyrics. In his headnote to the 1870 version, D. G. Rossetti stated:

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<sup>1</sup> The sequence consists of 101 sonnets. However, if 'Nuptial Sleep' (included in the 1870 version but suppressed in the 1881 and [posthumous] 1886 publications of the sequence and reintroduced in 1904) is taken into account (William Michael Rossetti numbers it V1a) and if the introductory sonnet is also counted, the total number of sonnets is 103.

<sup>2</sup> The first version 'Of Life, Love, and Death: Sixteen Sonnets' was published in *The Fortnightly Review* in March 1869, pp. 266-73, the 1870 version was reprinted by Oswald Doughty in his *Rossetti's Poems*, pp. 105-36, and the complete version is published in *Works*, pp. 74-108.

The first twenty-eight sonnets and the seven first songs treat of love. These and the others would belong to separate sections of the projected work.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1881 version of the poem Rossetti did as he predicted and divided the sequence into two sections: the first section 'Youth and Change' is dominated by love sonnets, the second section 'Change and Fate' contains diverse philosophical sonnets.

Critics have long argued over what kind of unity, if any, the final poem can be said to possess. Questions about the nature of *The House of Life* hinge on its themes and structure. For instance, *The House of Life* has often been called a love poem, but not all of the component sonnets can be called love poems in the usual sense of the word. William E. Fredeman writes:

*The House of Life* has been called a "House of Love" by many critics, and indeed, the poem is a love poem. The individual lyrics treat the several aspects of love, both physical and spiritual, but the sequence itself is abstract and idealistic.<sup>4</sup>

It is this 'abstract and idealistic' facet of the poem which has proved a problem in its interpretation. Fredeman writes as if it is generally agreed that the *whole* sequence may be regarded as a love poem, but many critics disagree with this view. It is commonly held that *The House of Life*, as it existed in 1870, might well be called *The House of Love*, but that the addition of the many diverse philosophical sonnets to the poem, made between 1870-1881 and largely confined to Part II (the division of the poem into two parts did not come until final version of 1881) changed its nature. Clyde de Ryals, for instance, declared:

Part I is devoted to love. It is important to stress that only Part I has love as its central subject. It is important because *The House of Life* is not, as so many critics have wished to envision it, a House of Love, rather, in *The House of Life* love plays only a part— a

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<sup>3</sup> See Doughty, *Rossetti's Poems*, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> William E. Fredeman, 'Rossetti's "In Memoriam": An Elegiac Reading of *The House of Life*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 47 (1965), p. 324.

large part admittedly, but nevertheless only a part. As Rossetti replied to Buchanan, "nearly one half of this [1870] series has nothing to do with love, but treats of quite other life-influences."<sup>5</sup>

Although most critics agree that there is unity to be found in the sonnets of Part I of the complete *House of Life*, it is sometimes difficult for them to reconcile these poems with the more various poems of Part II. The poems of Part II, true to their collective title 'Change and Fate', examine these influences on life but seem to have little relation to the love poems of the preceding section. In a sequence of such great length, written over thirty years, critics are liable to suspect that some of the sonnets included in the complete *House of Life* may have been placed there in order to serve as props to the purely architectural aspect of the poem rather than to enhance the theme or themes of the poem alone. Douglas R. Robillard, for example, in his important study of the Willowwood sonnets as the physical and thematic centre of the sequence, stated of the sonnets added to Part II of the poem between 1870 and 1881:

In the second half of the cycle, the insertions do not always seem to be dictated by reason, and we are left with the impression that some of the additions are made for the sake of mechanical balance.<sup>6</sup>

W. E. Fredeman and Robert D. Hume, with differing results, have each attempted to account for this seeming disparity between the two parts of the completed poem. Fredeman asserts that the ending of the poem is hopeful, finding that the poem traced the progression

... from innocent joy and hope, through disillusionment brought on by the recognition of the evanescence of beauty and love, to an ultimate acceptance of a transcending hope, a higher faith...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Clyde de Ryals, 'The Narrative Unity of *The House of Life*', *JEGP*, 69 (1970), pp. 245-46. Also see Robert D. Hume, 'Inorganic Structure in *The House of Life*', *PLL*, 5 (1969), p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas R. Robillard, 'Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets and the Structure of *The House of Life*', *VN*, 22 (1962), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> William E. Fredeman, 'Rossetti's "In Memoriam"', p. 323.

Hume does not agree with Fredeman's assertion that the ending of the poem is hopeful. Hume claims that Rossetti's sequence, unlike what he refers to as the 'doctored' conclusion of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, has rather a sad resolution.<sup>8</sup> The following discussion of *The House of Life* will address a series of interrelated questions: what sort of poem is *The House of Life*? Can it be called a love poem given the number of themes it encompasses? How can one account for the apparent divergence in theme between Parts I and II of the completed poem? And finally, what is the resolution of the poem— is it as hopeful as Fredeman would have us believe?

Thirty years ago W. E. Fredeman made

... an interpretative analysis of *The House of Life* as a kind of "In Memoriam", a retrospective view of Rossetti's life "transfigured" in artistic terms that are essentially elegiac.<sup>9</sup>

On the contrary, Robillard claimed that the poem

... is not, strictly speaking, an elegy, nor did Rossetti probably mean it to be. But it does partake of some of the machinery of the elegy— notably in its passages of grief for the loss of the beloved, in the constantly personal note of remorse for loss and wasted opportunity, in the range of mood and idea typical of the cyclical poem ...<sup>10</sup>

I agree with Fredeman rather than Robillard. Fredeman claims that the sequence is 'essentially elegiac', but I would go further: rather than resembling an elegy, the poem *is* an elegy. Fredeman and I differ in our interpretation of elegy as it pertains to *The House of Life*. Fredeman, for instance, writes:

... *The House of Life* may be viewed ... as an elegiac poem in

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<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Hume, 'Inorganic Structure' p. 295.

<sup>9</sup> Fredeman, 'Rossetti's "In Memoriam"', p. 302.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas R. Robillard, 'Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets', p. 6.

which Rossetti surveys the crises of his life from youth to death. Unlike conventional elegies, *The House of Life* does not employ the intermediary object of the dead friend or noble man. More direct, it is an intensely personal poem, but it cannot, as Rossetti finally arranged it, be read in literal, chronological, autobiographical terms . . .<sup>11</sup>

This is certainly a viable reading of the poem, but the reading which I will offer is more specific in terms of the way in which I define 'elegy'. Fredeman's idea is that D. G. Rossetti, rather than mourning a particular person (as *In Memoriam* pretends to do) mourns his whole life, although he finds some comfort at the end of the sequence. I believe that given the 'abstract and idealistic' nature of the sequence, rather than mourning the disappointments of his own life Rossetti mourns the death of Love itself, this 'death' having tremendous ramifications for his perception of his own life which has been lived, at least initially, according to Love.

Like Fredeman, I think that the whole poem is a love poem at least in the sense that the philosophic crises registered in some of the sonnets in Part I, and many or most of the sonnets in Part IIz stem from the failure of love. Like Christina Rossetti's and William Morris's lyric sequences, D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life* is essentially an elegy since it sings the song of the death of love.

*The House of Life* can be seen as acting as a coda to Christina Rossetti and William Morris's elegies. The three respective sequences are, of course, very different in form: the Seasonal Lyrics are twelve fairly short lyrics which assume the guise of paeans to the months, *Monna Innominata* is fourteen calm, controlled sonnets, *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente* is twenty-one sonnets and songs, whilst *The House of Life* is 101 highly polished sonnets divided into two sections, but all tell the same story—they mourn the death of love.

*The House of Life* reiterates the fundamental theme of the other lyric sequences, but it also rings some changes on this theme. Christina Rossetti's speakers renounced love. Sometimes it seemed that these women renounced love because of a religious difference which existed

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<sup>11</sup> Fredeman, 'Rossetti's "In Memoriam"', p. 334.

between them and their beloved, but at other times it seemed that they might simply prefer the sufficiency of heaven ('I full of Christ and Christ of me') to the vagaries of modern love. Christina Rossetti's lyric singers make very painful renunciations, but behind their renunciation there is the sense that in renouncing earthly pleasures they are being true to themselves; they have kept their personal integrity intact for the surrender, at an unknown future date, to Christ. Christina Rossetti's speakers may self-consciously renounce sexual love but Morris's speakers never have this opportunity, for they never attain a union with the beloved that lasts longer than an instant. They never really find the love they crave; so they never have the chance to renounce it. Still, Morris's speakers suffered a quandary over whether to confess love or remain silent, and sometimes the confessions that unwittingly escaped their lips forced them into a more bitter and hopeless silence than the one which they had endured before. D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*, perhaps in accordance with the personal experiences of its creator, tells the story (and the term 'story' can only be used with caution in regard to *The House of Life*) of a man who has had at least two highly successful, highly sexual relationships in which his experience of the sexual and spiritual reality of the other acutely blends. But this man eventually finds that love fails, and from this point the whole poem begins gradually transmuting itself from a poem of praise of love to an elegy for its loss.

Christina Rossetti's lyric sequences were, according to current evidence (both external and internal) written mostly from 1862 to the early 1870s, whilst William Morris's personal lyrics (both the Seasonal Lyrics and Fugitive Lyrics) were mostly written during one particularly stressful period in his life, the years 1865-1870. D. G. Rossetti's *The House of Life*, by way of contrast, was written over a period of more than thirty years. In this sense *The House of Life* is a life's work; he published it in its final form only a year before he died, and it contains sonnets from the earliest to the latest periods of his career.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Although it should be pointed out that Rossetti experienced a peak in his rate of sonnet production during the years of his affair with Jane Morris. In 1871, for instance, over thirty sonnets were composed. See *Works*, pp. xxiii-xxvi, and *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, with a Introduction and Notes by Paull Franklin Baum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 230.

*The House of Life* is an intense work and it is a personal work, but because of its more diffused composition it has a less immediate, personal intensity than Christina Rossetti's and William Morris's sequences. *The House of Life* nonetheless registers many 'moment's monuments', or successive crises in the life of the persona of the sequence, and there are many mini-series of sonnets throughout the sequence which are linked by a series of events outlined, a prevailing theme or mood, or formally linked with a joint title such as 'True Woman' (LVI, LVII, LVIII).

D. G. Rossetti's sequence is less directly autobiographical than the lyric sequences of Christina Rossetti and William Morris. *The House of Life* is without doubt an autobiographical sequence, but it is autobiographical in a general sense rather than in specific details. Because of this generality, the sheer number of sonnets and range of themes it explores, *The House of Life* does not possess the same kind of ardour which the other sequences possess. Nor does it have the same kind of inner turbulence: the sonnets of *The House of Life* do not veer between silence and confession in quite the same way in which Christina Rossetti and William Morris's lyrics do. D. G. Rossetti claimed that he dealt with 'life representative' and attempted to translate his own experiences of love, of loss, disappointment and grief into some universally understood form. The poems confess much, especially about sexuality and the meaning of sexuality in relation to romantic love and conceptions of the spiritual, but because Rossetti wished to make the experiences presented in the poem 'representative' he tended to bury personal meanings in order to retain his privacy. Nevertheless the poems still tell a heavily veiled, personal story.

As to this inner 'story' of *The House of Life*: no very precise chronology of personal events can be divined in the sequence and it is largely fruitless to look for them. There is evidence that many individual sonnets are autobiographical but the sonnets are not ordered according to composition date. As well as reordering the sonnets in order to fit them into his developing idea of the whole sequence, Rossetti shuffled the order of poems in order to frustrate autobiographical readings. For

example, Rossetti encouraged the view that some highly sexual sonnets, written in the late 1860s during his affair with Jane Morris, were written years earlier when his wife Elizabeth Siddall was still living. Similarly, Rossetti changed the hair colour of the beloved in some of the sonnets written after Siddall's death from dark (Jane Morris) to red gold (Siddall). William Michael Rossetti has published conjectural dates of composition for the individual sonnets as has Frederick Tisdell. Tisdell has attempted a reordering of the whole in order to discover a 'secret' autobiographical story.<sup>13</sup> A shadowy autobiographical story *can* be discerned in *The House of Life*, but this is of subsidiary interest to the 'general' story told by Rossetti: a story of love and grief.

Rather than one love in particular, 'love representative' is the subject of the complete *House of Life*. By Sonnet XXXVI of the complete sequence it seems fairly clear that one love has died to be replaced by a new love as in Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Later on there is a crisis in the relationship between the speaker and the Innominata and she too disappears. Elizabeth Siddall died and Rossetti and Jane Morris were separated,<sup>14</sup> but there could be other 'unidentified' women in the sequence. In any case the identity of the love-object scarcely matters: she is merely a woman with either golden or dark hair. The real subject of *The House of Life* is the relationship of the lover to his own concept of love, and the relationship of this concept of love to concepts of death, fulfillment, eternity, and poetry itself. It is through the interrelationship of these themes that the love and life sonnets are linked throughout the sequence.

The first sonnet of the sequence (aside from the ponderous introductory sonnet) is entitled 'Love Enthroned'. This sonnet signals many things about the sequence to follow. In its use of lofty personifications, for example, it indicates that this is not to be a seemingly private or 'overheard' document like Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* or William Morris's Seasonal Lyrics. Rather it is a public

<sup>13</sup> Frederick Tisdell, 'Rossetti's *House of Life*', *Modern Philology*, XV (1917), pp. 65-84.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Siddall died in 1862. According to Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris*, p. 131, Jane Morris broke off her relationship with D. G. Rossetti in 1876.



document suited to oratory rather than whispered endearments. The first sonnet announces the enthronement of love: love is deified as a power far above Truth, Hope, Fame, and even Life. In the second sonnet Love is born into the world through the conjunction of two people. Here, in 'Bridal Birth', the first personal note is sounded as the speaker addresses himself to the beloved: these two are as newborn children in their birth through love. Love is pictured as a mythological, winged creature which bursts into existence, whilst the lovers are innocents asleep in the forest.

It is only in the third sonnet, 'Love's Testament', that Rossetti warms to his theme and the imagery becomes sacramental rather than mythological. This, and the following sonnets 'Lovesight', 'Heart's Hope', and 'The Kiss' explore the nature of sexual love through ecclesiastical imagery. These poems, and many more to follow in the sequence (the term sonnet-sequence was coined by Rossetti) are all essentially about the 'inarticulate hour' of love in which the lovers try to achieve a complete union with each other either through the sexual act or through its mimicry in the closeness of their embrace. Rossetti has often been accused of appropriating Christian imagery to suit his own ends, that is, to create a type of religion of sexual love.<sup>15</sup> The use of many religious terms in Sonnet III such as 'testament', 'sanctuary' and 'deliverance' leaves Rossetti open to such charges. In defending these poems against charges of 'fleshliness' Rossetti always insisted that bodily and spiritual love were symbiotically related so that one was impossible without the other. As he states in Sonnet V, 'Heart's Hope':

Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.  
(*Works*, p. 76)

Throughout the sequence it is difficult to pinpoint Rossetti's beliefs about the place of sexual love in the universe and the interrelationships of

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<sup>15</sup> For an arguments of this kind see Harold L. Weatherby, 'Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *VP*, 2 (1964), pp. 11-17.

human love, the 'god' love, and the more conventional 'divine' love. Rossetti was not a practising Christian and his attraction to the symbols of Catholicism earned him much criticism. The whole of the *House of Life* might be viewed as Rossetti's quest to examine the links between the human and the divine pictured through the human struggle for unity with another being in a sexual relationship. In Stephen J. Spector's words, he was attempting to 'heal the wound of existence'.<sup>16</sup>

Spector's article, written over twenty years ago, is still one of the best summations of Rossetti's love poetry. Spector construes the failure of love in Rossetti's poetry as the failure of the self to achieve union with anything outside the subjective realm. He claims that 'Rossetti's poetry displays a self that is really conscious only of itself' and that this defeats the purpose of love poetry:

... Rossetti's poetry is, above all, love poetry; and love, of course, is usually a means of escaping the prison of the self. Traditionally love provides a way for the self to escape its own limitations; love is the most significant mode of human relationships which are interpersonal and therefore in direct contrast to the predicament where the self is locked in subjective isolation.<sup>17</sup>

Like the poetry of Christina Rossetti and William Morris, D. G. Rossetti's is a love poetry primarily concerned with the self. The love poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites is both subjective and elegiac. Because the poet-lovers regard the world in subjective terms they can never attain union with the beloved, but they sense that if this union were to be attained it would be unsatisfactory in any case, since it could not, as Spector says, 'heal the wound of existence'. Christina Rossetti awaited a complete mutual interpenetration of self and God, and Morris knew that earthly love was just that; so any happiness obtainable was of its very nature for a short duration only. Matthew Arnold's 'Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!' is a frail comfort for the soul that seeks perpetual meaning and

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen J. Spector, 'Love, Unity and Desire in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *ELH*, 38 (1971), p. 438.

<sup>17</sup> Spector, pp. 432-33.

comfort. Sexual love, the highest of all earthly pleasures, is its most transient and delusory pleasure. This is the truth which Christina Rossetti and Morris's speakers feared, a truth which the speaker of *The House of Life* affirms. Since the Pre-Raphaelite vision of love is elegiac, all that they are left with is the self, the poet-self who sings the song of the death of love. Pre-Raphaelite poetry is the poetry of the isolated and suffering subjective self who has momentarily attempted to escape the prison of the self through confession of love, but in the end is forced to retreat into silence.

For a time the love poems of *The House of Life* focus on the happiness found in the unity of a pair of lovers. The love poems of the first half of *The House of Life* describe, for example, many facets of love. As I have mentioned, some, like 'Love's Testament', 'Lovesight' and 'The Kiss' describe the semi-religious ecstasies to be found in love's 'inarticulate hour'. This 'inarticulate hour' or 'Love's hour' was a pervasive theme in Rossetti's poetry. This hour is similar to Browning's 'good minute' from 'Two in the Campagna' wherein the speaker wished, momentarily, to *become* the other, even though he knew this could not be done. Rather than wishing to *be* the other, Rossetti's speaker desires a mutual negation of the individual personalities of both himself and the beloved in a kind of Nirvana. In a breathless bower with neither light nor air nor sound he wishes for the merging of flesh and spirit. In some sonnets this union is pictured as an abstract blending of 'spirit' and 'sense' as in 'Youth's Antiphony' (XIII) which begins with a parody of the infantile prating of praises which young lovers exchange. This is the speech of young love which is much to be envied: 'Ah! happy they to whom such words as these / In youth have served for speech the whole day long', but it seems that even words of love can become a veil or barrier to the truth or reality behind them rather than an expression of that reality. The messages of mutual adoration are the surface song or echo ('antiphony') of another more sombre song which stirs beneath: the couple are fused by Love who 'breathed in sighs and silences / Through two blent souls one rapturous undersong'.

In other sonnets 'the inarticulate hour' is an hour of sex, or rather the hour immediately following. 'The Kiss' (VI), 'Nuptial Sleep' (VIa)

and 'Supreme Surrender' form a triad of sonnets celebrating sex. 'The Kiss' speaks frankly of the sexual act then branches out to consider the mystic possibilities of sex in a way that seems to prefigure D. H. Lawrence's 'dark gods':

I was a child beneath her touch,— a man  
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she,—  
A spirit when her spirit looked through me,—  
A god when all our life-breath met to fan  
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,  
Fire within fire, desire in deity.  
(*Works*, p. 76)

Child, man, spirit, god: physical love takes the speaker through the hierarchy to a pinnacle which transcends the human altogether. 'Nuptial Sleep' and 'Supreme Surrender' deal with the lover's more human exhausted wonder after sex. Both poems show the man awake in this 'sacred hour' after sex, observing the 'lady' who 'lies apparent'. The woman's hair flung across his breast recalls the lock of hair of the past belonging to the dead first love which he has no doubt retained as a keepsake.

After the 'holy' sexual sonnets comes a group of poems which dwell on the less intense, lulling pleasures of lovers' joint activities such as 'The Lovers' Walk' (XII), and 'Silent Noon' (1881). 'Silent Noon' is one of the most successful sonnets of the series. Here Rossetti fuses a semi-mystical concern for the unity of the lovers with the serenity of nature in a more pleasing way than in most of the other sonnets where conceptions of the natural and the spiritual world perceived in unity are sometimes strained and artificial.

'A Day of Love' (XVI) like 'Silent Noon' concerns the nature of the time lovers spend together. The lovers appear to be reunited after a separation:

Those envied places which do know her well,  
And are so scornful of this lonely place,  
Even now for once are emptied of her grace:  
Nowhere but here she is . . .  
(*Works*, p. 80)

The awe and joy aroused by the fact of the woman's presence is similar to

that evoked in 'Nuptial Sleep'. In this poem, as in many in the sequence (such as 'Youth's Antiphony') the harmony of the hours the lovers are able to spend together is depicted in musical terms: 'The hours of Love fill full the echoing space / With sweet confederate music favourable'. The sestet of the poem is strongly reminiscent of Morris's Seasonal and Fugitive lyrics which concentrate on the desire for fiery kisses but usually end with the couple 'twain', sitting apart. D. G. Rossetti's lovers also sit apart, wrapt in the silent world of love in which speech of things other than love is impossible:

As here between our kisses we sit thus  
Speaking of things remembered, and so sit  
Speechless while things forgotten call to us.

But their separation is only a temporary one, a time of respite between kisses.

Some sonnets turn rather awkward compliments to the lady-love using traditional conceits such as 'The Love-Letter' (XI), 'Genius in Beauty' (XVII) and 'Gracious Moonlight' (XX). Very gradually, a sense of foreboding falls over the sequence. 'Pride of Youth' (XXIV) for instance, speaks of the fickleness of time and youth: how a new love will easily drive away thoughts of the old love, ending with a remonstrance against this transience:

Alas for hourly change! Alas for all  
The loves that from his hand proud Youth lets fall,  
Even as the beads of a told rosary!  
(*Works*, p. 82)

Immediately following this poem is 'Winged Hours' (XXV) an ominous prediction of the future without love. 'Winged Hours', although it may be called a love poem, has much in common with the 'life' sonnets, 'A Superscription' (XCVII), 'The Landmark' (LXVII), and 'Lost Days' (LXXXVI), all of which mourn that we can only look back and regret the waste of our pasts when it is far too late to regain time, or lost ambition, or even lost love. 'Winged Hours', unlike the aforementioned philosophical sonnets which look to the past, strangely anticipates a time of loss and despair rather than remembering it. The sonnet begins with a

more or less conventional topic in love poetry, that of the nature of the time lovers spend apart from each other. In *Monna Innominata* Christina Rossetti summed the way in which the intense desire to be in the company of the beloved can warp time: 'We meet so seldom, yet we surely part / So often; there's a problem for your art!' (Sonnet 7). Her brother gives these hours bodily substance and sound. He likens the hours between lovers' meetings to the flight of a bird through 'The rustling covert of my soul'. This bird sings on his way to the meeting of the lovers, yet perplexingly, though its song is loud and clear and true, when the lovers meet, their time apart, and thus the song, is forgotten: 'Yet, Love, thou know'st the sweet strain suffers wrong / Full oft through our contending joys unheard'. It is only proper that separation should be forgotten in happy unity, but the consideration of this time of mutual peace is conceived in warring terms— 'our contending joys'— gives way in the sestet to a prediction of future loss and damage, a time when there will be no bird's song to mark the hours of separation since they will not be together again and each will be aware of the loss:

What of that hour at last, when for her sake  
 No wing may fly to me nor song may flow;  
 When, wandering round my life unleaved, I know  
 The bloodied feathers scattered in the brake,  
 And think how she, far from me, with like eyes  
 Sees through the untuneful bough the wingless skies?  
 (*Works*, p. 83)

The love song of the bird, like Love's song in 'Willowwood', is ambiguous. It seems that Rossetti is saying that although the time lovers spend apart may be painful, the love experienced in absence may be more true and in some ways ultimately more satisfying than the reality of lovers' meetings in which their very kisses are 'contending', or else the lovers could simply be separated by circumstances beyond their control. In any case the end will still be the same: the speaker of the sonnet knows that one day he and his love will meet no more. This sonnet appears to all but sound the death knell of love, but there are many more sonnets between this and the end of Part One of the sequence.

'Heart's Compass' (XXVII) articulates the burden of meaning that is placed by the lover on the beloved: 'Sometimes thou seem'st not as

thymself alone, / But as the meaning of all things that are'. Here the beloved woman is apostrophised as the hand of Love, all power of Love is vested in her and her very name is Love:

Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart  
All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;  
Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above;  
And simply, as some gage of flower or glove,  
Stakes with a smile the world against thy heart.  
(*Works*, p. 83).

This could be seen as an appreciation of the vast power of the woman's love— that the deity Love can act through her. But the woman seems more acted upon than acting. The impression given by the sentiments of the poem is that the woman's greatness and power really belong to the speaker since it is his poetic conceit that endows her with such power, and his love perhaps which inspires such great love in her.

The sequence had begun with the celebration of the power of love communicated through the union of two lovers, but the speaker comes more and more to celebrate the power of the woman's love for him. His praises, the more exuberant they become, ring more and more falsely. By deifying the greatness of her love the speaker seems to be propping up his own ego, reassuring himself that this love is, after all, for him. Nowhere in the sequence is there a sense of a flesh and blood woman or women.

In Christina Rossetti and William Morris's lyrics communication between poet-lover and beloved was attempted: *Monna Innominata, Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente* and even 'By Way of Remembrance' may be regarded as one side of a conversation or correspondence whilst Morris's speakers implore a response from the silent woman over and over again. D. G. Rossetti, however, is a ventriloquist, asking his women all the questions and supplying them with all the answers. In 'Soul-Light' (XXVIII), for instance, these lines occur: 'What other woman could be loved like you, / Or how of you could love possess his fill?' This could be seen, and is intended to be seen, as an immense compliment to the woman, but we are never given any proofs of her great love. We are simply told of it as if it were a credit to the lover or to the god Love rather than to the woman herself. The woman does not seem to demonstrate

this immense capacity for love in any tangible way except for what the lover tells us he sees reflected in her eyes: it is his interpretation of her gaze and his reification of her in verse that is all important. The woman herself is as remote and unknowable as the moon which is addressed in the following sonnet 'The Moonstar' (XXIX). This is a piece of renaissance sonneteering, the octave of which reads:

Lady, I thank thee for thy loveliness,  
Because my lady is more lovely still.  
Glorying I gaze, and yield with glad goodwill  
To thee thy tribute; by whose sweet-spun dress  
Of delicate life Love labours to assess  
My lady's absolute queendom; saying, "Lo!  
How high this beauty is, which yet doth show  
But as that beauty's sovereign votaress".  
(*Works*, p. 84)

This sonnet does nothing to glorify the lady; instead it looks like an attempt by the sonneteer to glorify his waning talents. As the speaker's unity with the beloved fades throughout the sequence he becomes more determined to celebrate the lady's love, but he is celebrating a love which, though perhaps part of the god Love's, is essentially a love apart from him. In 'Her Gifts' (XXXI) what begins as a traditional compliment regarding the woman's physical beauty gradually becomes a deification of the beloved. The speaker catalogues his love's individual beauties, or 'gifts'; these are all physical attributes pictured in relation to nature. Her glance, for instance, is 'like water brimming with the sky', her cheeks have a 'thrilling pallor', her mouth, her 'golden locks' and (compulsorily Pre-Raphaelite) 'round-reared neck', feet and hands are in turn paid homage. But there is another fundamental mystery to this silent woman: 'These are her gifts, as tongue may tell them o'er. / Breathe low her name, my soul; for that means more'. This is one of a number of times when Rossetti plays with the idea of love's sacred name. Whether love's name is sacred because the woman must be unnamed, or because her name, being hers, is sacred, or because her name is Love, we do not discover.

The string of poems exalting the love of the woman is broken by the appearance of 'The Dark Glass' (XXIV), a piece which sounds genuinely



humble and places the lover in an awed position in relation to his love for the woman and his position in the universe. This is also one of the loveliest and clearest of the 'mystical' sonnets. As Baum states: 'In this sonnet Rossetti comes close to genuine sublimity without his besetting sin of artificial elaboration either of idea or diction.'<sup>18</sup> Here the speaker concentrates once more on his love for the woman, rather than her love for him:

Not I myself know all my love for thee:  
How should I reach so far, who cannot weigh  
To-morrow's dower by gage of yesterday?  
(Works, p. 86)

He finds that his little human love gives him some knowledge of the grander whole of Love:

Yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call  
And veriest touch of powers primordial  
That any hour-girt life may understand.

Then, in 'The Lamp's Shrine' (XXXV), the speaker continues appraising his own love for the woman, but he does so in more overblown terms: 'Sometimes I fain would find in thee some fault, / That I might love thee still in spite of it . . . '

According to Baum, in 'Life-in-Love' (XXXVI) 'we meet for the first time *unmistakably* in the sequence the New Beloved' [Baum's italics]<sup>19</sup>. Here we also have the most concrete reference to the dead beloved. Her hair is described thus in one of the most eloquent of Rossetti's sestets:

Even so much life hath the poor tress of hair  
Which, stored apart, is all love hath to show  
For heart-beats and for fire-heats long ago;  
Even so much life endures unknown, even where,  
'Mid change the changeless night environeth,  
Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death.

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<sup>18</sup> Baum, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Baum, p. 115.

Thomas Hall Caine recorded that Rossetti kept a long tress of Elizabeth Siddall's hair. Hall Caine's 'confession' of this incident is as veiled, 'silent' and 'sacred' as Pre-Raphaelite love poetry itself:

I remember that one day, opening a drawer of the book-case, under the books he took out a long, thick tress of rich auburn hair, and showed it to me for a moment. What he told me about it I cannot say, but indeed there was no need to tell me anything, for I thought I knew what it was and where it came from. That was one of those hushed moments of life in which silence is sacred, and I will not break it farther even now.<sup>20</sup>

Following 'Life-in-Love' the 'The Love Moon' (XXXVII) again mentions the dead love and ushers in the first tones of real guilt in the sequence which was only hinted at earlier in 'Pride of Youth' (XXIV). Here the speaker tries to justify his new love by means of claiming that through the new beloved he finds another means of gaining access to Love itself:

"Nay, Master, shall not Death make manifest  
In these the culminant changes which approve  
The love-moon that must light my soul to Love?"  
(*Works*, p. 87)

This may be a mere word-game rather than a feasible excuse for inconstancy, but it indicates an underlying uneasiness in the speaker's thoughts over how to reconcile past and present loves, as if he has somehow corrupted himself and Love by the ease with which he has moved from one love to another. From this point onwards there is no real happiness in love expressed in the sequence. Instead there is a growing sense of dismay over the ineluctable disintegration of love.

In 'The Morrow's Message' (XXXVIII) the speaker is growing suicidal. This growing uneasiness or spiritual torpor reaches a climax in 'Sleepless Dreams' (XXXIX) which acts as a precursor to the climax of the whole of *The House of Life*, the 'Willowwood' quartet. 'Sleepless Dreams' (originally called 'Sleepless Love') describes some of the symptoms of the

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Baum, *The House of Life*, p. 116.

'soul-struck widowhood' endured by one whose soul perpetually wanders in Willowwood. This sonnet is rather hard to decipher at first due to Rossetti's circumlocutions, complex imagery and evasive rhetorical questions. The speaker observes the beauty of the night: 'O vain night sweeter than the nights of youth!', but finds in the very sweetness of the night a kind of treachery. The night is false; it is the sort of night that invites love, but there is no love to be had. The speaker bemoans his state of readiness, the mental and sensory stimulation brought about by the night which will not deliver its promise of the satisfaction of all his impulses. He likens his state of eager anticipation to that of the 'finger-pulse' of a bride upon wearing her wedding ring— the microcosm of the pulsing of her fingers echoing the pulsing of her body in preparation for her wedding night. This night imitates a wedding night as do the speaker's impulses which will not be quelled by activity as will the impulses of the bride.

The night, and with it, the prospect of sleep, seem pleasant to the speaker, but sleep will not come to him, it is 'waved back by Joy and Ruth'. The inclusion of 'Joy' at first seems rather curious as the speaker does not seem to be in a particularly joyful state of mind. Yet Joy is present due to the speaker's expectation of experiencing dreams of love, but Ruth appears as Sleep is kept at bay. The speaker is angry with the night which seems to trick him so by offering false expectation of a false love. He begs the night to find in it some place for these dreams of love:

... Would false Love counterfeit in thee  
 The shadowy palpitating grove that bears  
 Rest for man's eyes and music for his ears?  
 O lonely night! art thou not known to me,  
 A thicket hung with masks of mockery  
 And watered with the wasteful warmth of tears?  
 (*Works*, p. 87)

The sonnet is called 'Sleepless Dreams' ironically, since neither sleep nor dreams come to the speaker. Yet he is threatened with the prospect of false dreams of love being inspired by the condition of the night.

The separation of lovers prefigured in 'One day of Love' and 'Winged Hours' is again the focus of 'Severed Selves' (XL) which renders the man and woman as two Platonic halves: 'Two separate divided

silences, / Which, brought together, would find loving voice'. Apart, each of the lovers seems useless. The speaker longs for union with the woman, but this union will be for no longer than the much-desired hour which will be over far too quickly: 'Faint as shed flowers, the attenuated dream'. The earlier sonnets of union dwelt on the ecstasies of the 'inarticulate hour' 'when two-fold silence was the song of love'; love itself was perfected in that hour but now the speaker, growing older perhaps and wearied by the strain of continual meetings and partings with the object of his love, cannot find that perfection any longer since it is marred for him by the knowledge that he will soon be alone with his memories of love and fears for its loss. The speaker's feeling of hopelessness now gains momentum. In the next few sonnets, 'Hope Overtaken' and 'Love and Hope' he becomes more and more depressed. 'Secret Parting' (XLIV) is about just that: this sonnet registers the departure of the new beloved. No explanation for the parting is given but, as is shown in the title, it is probable that the whole relationship like its denouement has been secret. All of the absences and separations of the sequence can be easily explained by the assumption that the relationship described was an illicit, and therefore spasmodic, affair.

'Death-in-Love' (XVLVIII), the last sonnet before the 'Willowwood' sequence, is explicitly elegiac. William Michael Rossetti interprets the sonnet thus: 'It intimates that Earthly Love partakes of the nature of Death. Death dominates and concludes Earthly Love; Love is the thrall of mortality'.<sup>21</sup> This may be meant literally: earthly love may be ended by the death of the lovers; but it may also be understood more metaphorically: love simply dies. Love may die for many reasons: D. G. Rossetti's sequence persona in *The House of Life* makes many protestations and announcements about Love's place in the scheme of things and the relationship of the individual man and woman to that broader love, but he never seems to reconcile any of the elements in his cosmic mix—he has no real certainty. His lack of certainty is a result of the subjective isolation which is his constant condition except for fleeting moments of

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<sup>21</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (London: Cassell & Company, 1889), p. 215.

perceived union in the past: he can never escape the prison of the self. The 'Willowwood' sequence is a mini-opera showing the last attempt of Rossetti's speaker to breach the walls of the prison of self and find union with the beloved even if this union can be consummated only at the level of memory.

'Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; / I am also called No-more Too-late, Farewell'. These famous lines from 'A Superscription' (XCVII) sum up the change from the first to the second half of *The House of Life* which comes with the 'Willowwood' sequence. We can only guess at what has been lost—it could be the literal loss of love in the form of the death of the beloved, or it could be the death of the hope of love, or even the self's faith that decisions made and paths taken were the correct ones in the long term. The horror of loss is felt while at the same time its cause remains mysterious.

Like Christina Rossetti and William Morris's 'death of love' poems 'Willowwood', which describes a variety of griefs, is elegiac in tone. Instead of yielding up its secrets the 'Willowwood' poems become stranger and more implacable with each reading. Robillard describes the subsequence as a 'purification ritual' but at every point it is both bizarre and ambiguous. This reader doubts that the lover is purged of his guilt or longing at all since he seems taunted rather than comforted by Love's presence and revelations. Like *Hamlet*, *The House of Life* is a conundrum, an intensely rich and difficult work which poses questions time and again giving only the most tentative answers. 'Willowwood' is perhaps the most riddling of all Rossetti's poems. Its very language and rhythms, like Swinburne's gushing melodies, invite recitation without proper attention to meaning. Rossetti was rebuked by his brother for his audacious rhymes, particularly in 'Willowwood' II:

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,  
With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning red:  
Alas! if ever such a pillow could  
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead . . .  
(*Works*, p. 91)

The Willowwood sub-sequence presents a surreal, bewildering succession of mannered images and lurid emotions. Everything which follows

Willowwood must necessarily be an anti-climax. 'Willowwood' (I) describes the lover seated, looking into a well in a pose now long familiar from various Burne-Jones depictions of people looking into wells and meeting with surprising reflections. The lover is not alone. Across the well he faces 'Love' who plays a lute. The sound of the lute becomes a lost love's voice, and at the same time the reflection of Love's face in the water becomes the face of the beloved woman which leads the lover to bend and kiss her image in the water. This consummation of grief-stricken desire is famously described in the lines to which Robert Buchanan so virulently objected: 'And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth'.<sup>22</sup> This sonnet stretches the boundaries of that which is usually called a 'love' poem as it lacks most of the characteristics commonly associated with the term 'love poetry'. For example, it is not a plea or entreaty to the love-object; it does not celebrate the pleasures of love or loving or even bewail the loss of these pleasures in any explicit way. Rather it examines the chaotic wrenching of the self attendant upon the desire for union with the beloved. This union comes in what Rossetti termed 'the longing fancy' of the speaker of the poem who kisses the face reflected in the water. This face is constantly changing: at times it is Love's face, at times it is the speaker's own face, and for the duration of what must be one of the longest kisses recorded in poetry it is the face of the imagined beloved.

'Willowwood' describes a state of madness caused by overwhelming grief. The sonnets echo their subject— their movement and diction is rash, ill-advised, discordant, abrupt, and awry. After the orgiastic ending of Sonnet I we move quickly to a rather vague description of the contents of 'Love's song'. The lover cannot listen attentively to this song since it reminds him of too much else in the past connected with his lost love: 'So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free', but the song (and his avoidance of it) draw his attention to the silent melancholy figures surrounding them, doppelgängers of his love and himself and their joint past. These spirit-forms, the ghouls of love, recognise the lover and Love

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<sup>22</sup> See Robert Buchanan [Thomas Maitland], 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti', *The Contemporary Review*, XVIII, October 1871, p. 342.

who in turn recognise them. Willowwood is evidently the place of the soul's judgment, the history of lovers will be tested there and their destiny writ. Judgment Day is mentioned in the opening lines:

And now Love sang: but his was such a song,  
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,  
As souls disused in death's sterility  
May sing when the new birthday tarries long . . .

Throughout this sonnet we are expected to acknowledge that the kiss of the lover and the image in the water continues but that the lover is simultaneously aware of the Willowwood forms which surround him (he presumably has eyes in the back of his head) or else sees the forms reflected in the water (thereby kissing with his eyes open). It seems that these forms are called up by Love's song and the kiss represents all that they lack and desire; as we learn later in the enigmatic utterance: 'And pity of self through all made broken moan / Which said, "For once, for once, for once alone!" '. This plea is difficult to interpret: it could mean that the doppelgänger figures yearn for integrity of self, to be alone again rather than wedded to the shades of their lovers on earth, or it could mean that for one more time 'alone' they long for the temporary union with the beloved which the speaker is currently enjoying. I tend to favour the first explanation given that although they are seemingly unhappy spirit forms these doppelgänger are nevertheless *together*; so a union is not what they would most desire. Rather they long for freedom. They pity their own selves but they also pity the self whom they are watching because of the futility of his gesture towards the past and of course they *are* reflections of the selves of the speaker and his beloved, just like the woman's face in the water.

Sonnet III is Love's song. Here we learn that the figures ringing the trees are some sort of spirits accursed through love and that Willowwood itself is a land of limbo, a hell for grieving lovers who cannot end their sufferings. Doomed to wander, to grieve, to weep, to hope, the lovers inhabit a fantastic plane where Love declares to the shades and one of their originators: 'Better all life forget her than this thing, / That Willowwood should hold her wandering!' It seems a warning to the

lover to forget his love lest he and she wander forever in Willowwood. These lines are ambiguous and syntactically contorted. Love may mean that it is better for the speaker (and with him, the shades that are partly him) to forget his whole life rather than continue to be obsessed with his lost beloved and thus inhabit the scary territory of Willowwood, since Willowwood is like a possession of the soul, a psychic limbo so devastating that he would be better off dead than linger there any longer?

Sonnet IV describes the effect of Love's song. The woebegone wanderers are mentioned no more, but very slowly, as the lover and his watery bride complete their cathartic kiss, the phantom love disperses:

And her face fell back drowned, and was as grey  
As its grey eyes; and if it ever may  
*Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.*  
(Works, p. 92) [my italics]

Does the speaker mean that Love does not know if he, the speaker, will see his love's grey eyes again in earth or heaven, or if he will see them again in Willowwood land on a return journey there? There is no answer, for Love is now silent. The lover drinks again from the pool, drinking water mixed with 'her breath and all her tears and all her soul': a truly potent mixture. The experience may have proved one of solace to him:

And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face  
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,  
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

The lover's head, placed inside the bending aureole of Love, indicates that he had received some sort of blessing or deification through his suffering. Love has conferred grace on him. Perhaps this benediction will help him to forget love altogether so that he need not ever return to Willowwood. Sanity lies in forgetfulness.

Soon after the 'Willowwood' sequence, Part I of *The House of Life* ends with 'Love's Last Gift':

Love to his singer held a glistening leaf,  
And said: "The rose-tree and the apple-tree  
Have fruits to vaunt or flowers to lure the bee;



And golden shafts are in the feathered sheaf  
Of the great harvest-marshal, the year's chief,  
Victorious Summer, aye, and 'neath the warm sea  
Strange secret grasses lurk inviolably  
Between the filtering channels of sunk reef.

"All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love  
To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang;  
But Autumn stops to listen, with some pang  
From those worse things the wind is moaning of.  
Only this laurel dreads no winter days:  
Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise."  
(Works, p. 94)

'Love's Last Gift' marks the end of Part I of *The House of Life*. The sweet youth of love is over and all we are left with is poetry: this is Love's last gift. In Part II of the sequence the speaker will use Love's last gift, poetry, to search for meaning in a world where love has died. 'Love's Last Gift' marks the end of youth and the kind of hope that goes with youth. It also marks the dethronement of the residing deity, Love, enthroned in sonnet I and Lord throughout 'Youth and Change'. Part I had all the experimental nature of youth, with wild enthusiasm in some love sonnets and wild despair in others. As I have shown, the sonnets of Part I took many forms: there were 'holy sexual' sonnets and 'inarticulate hour' sonnets (either holy or pastoral), lovers' activities sonnets, sonnets which framed elaborate compliments, sonnets that mourned the dead love, others which marked the transition from the old to the new love and recorded the consequent guilt that this caused in the sequence persona; other sonnets bemoaned the separation of the lovers, and some were sonnets foreboding the eventual loss of love through death or discord. Although some sonnets in Part I dealt with philosophical issues these were all essentially love sonnets but in the second half of *The House of Life* there are no love sonnets: love is hardly ever mentioned. Love is forgotten with 'Willowwood' because the lover cannot go back and risk that kind of madness. It is this forgetfulness of love which explains why love is rarely mentioned in Part II of *The House of Life*. 'Change and Fate' is about how to live in a world without love: it is a poem about maturity. If the sequence is to be regarded as the emanation of one persona then it must be said of this persona, put cynically, that the difference between Part I and Part II of *The House of Life* is that he has grown up and the most

important factor of this growth has been his loss of faith in sexual love. The second half of the sequence concerns how to live without love. Many sonnets are about regret, many others are about finding new ways to live; different avenues of living are explored in 'The Choice' (LXXI, LXXII, LXXIII) series, for instance, and the 'Old and New Art' (LXXIV, LXXV, LXXVI) group. Some of the philosophical sonnets derive from the early part of Rossetti's career. So *The House of Life* cannot be simply read as a directly autobiographical statement of Rossetti's attitude towards his life at any particular time, but the fact that the philosophical sonnets are placed in the second section of the sequence is important.

'A Superscription' is one of the best-known sonnets of *The House of Life*. It is almost equal in power and persuasiveness to the 'Willowwood' group. Like 'The Landmark' and 'Lost Days' it deals with the uncertainty of life, how choices made or missed determine our future, and how we only realise this when it is far too late for us to remedy the past. As the first lines of 'The Landmark' show (and as we will later find in the case of Guenevere's choice between red and blue cloths in Morris's 'Defence of Guenevere') it is not always possible to choose one's way with full knowledge of the meaning of things: 'Was *that* the landmark? What, — the foolish well / Whose wave, low down I did not stoop to drink?' The well image reminds us of Willowwood, yet this time the image of drinking from the forest well becomes a more generalised image of meeting one's fate or choosing one's track ('track' is a word which occurs very frequently throughout *The House of Life*). 'Lost Days' (LXXXVI), another grief sonnet, also has close imagistic connections with the Willowwood poems. The 'Lost Days' of the speaker's life are imagined as accusatory Willowwood type figures who admonish him for having laid them to waste. They are figures cast up and counted by a voice very much like that of the soothsayer in 'A Superscription'. The voice of 'Lost Days' intones:

"I am thyself,— what hast thou done to me?"  
 "And I— and I— thyself," (lo! each one saith,)  
 "And thou thyself to all eternity!"  
 (Works, p. 103)

Instead of speaking directly about love, some sonnets of Part II of the sequence use love within analogies about other things. 'Lost on Both Sides' (XCI) and 'Known in Vain' (LXV) mention love; they both use love as a metaphor for something else, yet the love part of each poem is more memorable than the underlying idea which it is used to represent. 'Known in Vain' uses the too-late realisation of love between a pair of lovers as an analogy about wasted time and opportunities: like love, 'Work' and 'Will' can awake too late to be of use since life has passed. The imagery of 'Known in Vain' echoes the love sonnets wherein enclosed, privately reverent spaces and sacred music epitomise the silent hour of love, but it is now a hopeless hour: 'As two whose love, first foolish, widening scope, / Knows suddenly, to music high and soft . . . But sitting oft / Together, within hopeless sight of hope / For hours are silent'.

Prior to 'Newborn Death I and II' 'Inclusiveness' appears. Robillard thinks the sonnet was placed where it is to act as a buffer.<sup>23</sup> The rather bewildering title, according to William Michael Rossetti, may be taken to mean that ' . . . one same thing has different aspects and influences to different persons and according to different conditions'.<sup>24</sup> This sonnet uses successive analogies to present its theme of despair. As in many of Christina Rossetti's 'It' poems, in particular 'Memory I' and 'II', life, memory, and the chances of fate are represented as a room wherein the soul sits. Again, as in 'Willowwood' and 'Lost Days', the past and loss are represented as separate, confronting entities: 'May not this ancient room thou sitt'st in dwell/ In separate living souls for joy or pain?' This image is burst by the following lines:

Nay, all its corners may be painted plain  
Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;  
And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,  
Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

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<sup>23</sup> Robillard, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> 'Notes', *Works*, p. 655.

Admonishing images of might-have-beens are played out to the tortured soul which cannot close its eyes or memories against them.

In 'Newborn Death' analogies again prosper and multiply. Death is conceived as the omnipresent, necessary truth of life. The speaker works towards reconciliation with 'infant death' as child-friend rather than destroyer. In Sonnet I Death is addressed, in Sonnet II, life. 'Newborn Death II' demands a proof that all labour, love, song, and art should not be wasted in death. The second sonnet ends in a lovely invocation:

Lo! Love, the child once ours; and Song, whose hair  
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;  
And Art, whose eyes were worlds by God found fair:  
These o'er the book of Nature mixed their breath  
With neck-twined arms, as oft we watched them there:  
And did these die that thou mightst bear me Death?

The grimness and grief of the sequence are partly made up for by the consoling beauty of the images cast up by the speaker's ruminations.

In 1869 the sequence ended with the 'Newborn Death' sonnets. But what of the ending of the 1881, final arrangement of the sonnets with 'The One Hope' (CI)? Like many of the sonnets, its gorgeous mystery is a little difficult to penetrate at first:

When vain desire at last and vain regret  
Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,  
What shall assuage the unforgotten pain  
And teach the unforgetful to forget?  
Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet,—  
Or may the soul at once in a green plain  
Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain  
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air  
Between the scripted petals softly blown,—  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,—  
Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er  
But only the one Hope's one name be there,—  
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.  
(*Works*, p. 108)

The answer to all the speaker's queries is that he does not know any of the answers to his queries or hopes; he can only hope for peace at some time in the far distant future. William Michael Rossetti interprets the

last few lines thus:

. . . culling a flower inscribed (as the Greek fancy assumed the hyacinth to be inscribed) with some lettering, indicating what is to be the boon accorded to the Soul as its portion in eternity. What he longs to find inscribed upon the flower is "the one Hope's one name" — that is, the name of the woman supremely beloved upon earth.<sup>25</sup>

The 'One Hope' is, after all, a hope of union with the beloved somewhere, sometime. *The House of Life*, like William Morris and Christina Rossetti's lyric sequences, rehearses the story of the loss of love which will keep being repeated. Love will die, but long live love. Love will be renounced and remain unspoken, but love will emerge again from memory, from the past, even from death, and it will always remain the one last hope.

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<sup>25</sup> William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, pp. 260-1.

## Part Two: Narratives

She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung her hair,  
Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,  
With passionate twisting of her body there . . .

— William Morris

But like a babbling tale of barren breath  
Seemed all report and rumour held of death,  
And a false bruit the legend tear-impearled  
That such a thing as change was in the world.  
And each bright song upon his lips that came,  
Mocking the powers of change and death by name,  
Blasphemed their bitter godhead, and defied Time.

— A. C. Swinburne

She sang the heart out of his breast,  
The words out of his tongue;  
Hand and foot and pulse he paused  
Till her song was sung.

— Christina Rossetti

. . . she saw him bend  
Back Robert's head; she saw him send  
The thin steel down; the blow told well,  
Right backward the knight Robert fell,  
And moaned as dogs do, being half dead . .  
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,  
Who ran, some five or six, and beat  
His head to pieces at their feet.

— William Morris

Amelotte spoke not any word  
Nor moved she once; she felt  
Between her hands in narrow space  
Her own hot breath upon her face,  
And kept in silence the same place.

— D. G. Rossetti

## Chapter Four


### Beloved Queens

#### Pre-Raphaelite Women in Love

#### Introductory: Bodylining

Females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers, must surely possess some extraordinary qualities to counteract their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves.

— Robert Buchanan [Thomas Maitland]

N the first three chapters of this thesis, jointly entitled 'Elegies', I examined the warring impulse between silence and confession of love found in the first-person lyric poetry of Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti. In these poems erotic love is elegised as the only thing of lasting value on earth or in heaven— love is dead, but long live love. The pain of the realisation that love is dead or must die but is nevertheless the only thing worth striving for, the only immortality worth achieving and the only morality worth adhering to, leads to a hypothesis similar to that of Philip Larkin's: 'What will survive of us is love'<sup>1</sup>; or to turn this around a little: 'What must survive of us is love'. In the death of love, as in all death, we find our only meaning in life: an intense admixture of pleasure and pain which makes us human while at the same time brings us closer to the angels. There is a tug between reticence— love and the pain of losing love cannot be specified too directly— alternating with poignant outbursts of affirmation and protest which constitute the powerful attractiveness of the articulate heart of Pre-Raphaelite love poetry.

The first part of this thesis dealt with poetry of the inner 'I' addressed to the beloved, the non-specified, outer 'You'. The second part of this thesis begins with an examination of love observed from the outside as displayed in the character of the Pre-Raphaelite woman in love. In this fourth chapter I will examine four principal figures in the *dramatis personæ* of Pre-Raphaelite love poetry. In Pre-Raphaelite painting,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, 'An Arundel Tomb', in *The Collected Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 111.

particularly D. G. Rossetti's lush oil paintings of Jane Morris and other favourite models tricked out in various guises (such as his Proserpine, Sybilla Palmifera and Pandora) woman is the anima, the silent unknowable beloved. Yet in Pre-Raphaelite narrative poetry such as the romance, epic, ballad, and dramatic monologue (especially those of William Morris) woman is often the seeker and winner of love rather than the passive recipient of man's attentions. She is a figure invested with much sympathy, and demonstrating much power; she has all the physical charms of D. G. Rossetti's Blessed Damozels without their death-wish pallor and lack of movement— she shows an arresting conviction, liveliness, and an intriguing psychological complexity revealed in both word and gesture.

The twentieth-century feminist reader of Morris has reason to rejoice: within the structures of his redrawing of myth and legend he celebrates the female in psychological, physical, and spiritual terms. Morris's socialism and temperament were such that he loathed many of the institutions of his day. His famous invocation

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,  
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,  
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;  
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,  
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,  
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.  
(III, p. 3)

has been cited with tiresome frequency as an indicator of the escapist philosophy inherent in the schema of *The Earthly Paradise*, yet this vast, rich poem deals with permanent human problems: how to live, how to love, how to reconcile love and fate and death. In the perennial stories in which he explores these problems Morris demonstrates a humaneness, a generosity of feeling and a sympathy for human desires and failings which is the chief hallmark of his personality and writings. In *The Earthly Paradise* he does not necessarily denigrate men or directly deride patriarchal systems: his women are simply more *alive* than his men. Morris probes the human psyche, his chief subject is love and he measures men and women according to their ability to experience and be faithful to passion. Some of the many men and women who appear in



the pages of *The Earthly Paradise* are little more than sketches, but the more fully rounded and interesting characters are usually women. Perhaps this is because his women are allowed to articulate their love and their pain more frequently than the men.

Females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam . . .', the epigraph from Robert Buchanan's infamous essay 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' which I have chosen for this introductory section, facetious as it no doubt is, is also in many respects an accurate summation of the physicality of the Pre-Raphaelite woman. To answer Buchanan's query: the extraordinary qualities that these 'females' possess which complement (rather than counteract) 'their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves' is that as well as expressing themselves through their bodies, they talk.

Like Guenevere from *The Defence of Guenevere* volume (whom I will examine later in this chapter), the heroines of *The Earthly Paradise* express their feelings through 'passionate twisting' of their bodies. Women's bodies are important in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, not just as beautiful objects (although there is most definitely a paucity of ugly women in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and the reader is invited to admire, desire, and even covet women's bodies) but as the barometer of the state of the mind or spirit.

In a recent article Constance Hassett's observations echo Buchanan's:

One of the peculiarities of *The Defence of Guenevere* is that its characters shiver, totter, start, jerk, and pant. Their actions are so fitful, their limbs so oddly articulated, that they become at moments indecipherably alien.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Defence of Guenevere* and elsewhere, Morris, like Christina Rossetti and D. G. Rossetti, explores psychological states through a representation of the physical. This physicalisation often comes piecemeal: all of the Pre-Raphaelites, even Christina Rossetti, are obsessed with women's hair

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<sup>2</sup> Constance W. Hassett, 'The Style of Evasion: William Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*', *VP*, 29 (1991), p. 99.

(particularly golden hair)<sup>3</sup>. All are likewise fascinated by women's column-like necks; Laura in *Goblin Market* stretches her 'gleaming neck', D. G. Rossetti's 'Song of the Bower' features a lady who waits with 'Large lovely arms and a neck like a tower', and in Morris's 'Golden Wings' Jehane weeps thus: 'Her long throat, stretched to its full length, / Rose up and fell, right brokenly'. Hair, necks, and, for Morris, feet. In addition to the torso and the head Morris shows a curious, perhaps fetishistic interest in women's feet throughout the *Guenevere* volume and *The Earthly Paradise*.

In this chapter I will discuss how the Pre-Raphaelite poets have used physicality, itemisations of body parts, or the activity of these body parts, to illustrate psychic stress. The very fact that women are physically described in narrative poems is in itself important. In the first three chapters of this thesis the beloved was seldom, if at all, physically described. Unlike the troubadour poets whose traditions the Pre-Raphaelite poets sometimes imitated only to subvert, the Pre-Raphaelites do not usually find the need to praise the features of the beloved. This omission was due to both the 'secret' or 'overheard' nature of the lyric sequence and the subjective isolation of the poet-lover. There is no need to publicly praise the beauty of the beloved in a document meant only for your own eyes. There is also a certain solipsism evident in the lyric sequences: since they elegise love the sequences are usually written at the end of the affair; they are self-communing utterances which will never be read by the beloved; therefore they do not seek to entreat, seduce, or flatter.

In the narrative and ballad poetry of the Pre-Raphaelite males the female is constantly objectified. It is the male poet's gaze that becomes the reader's; the female reader becomes both the male gazer and the female object of that gaze. A twin identification is thus set up. In her ballads

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<sup>3</sup> On the subject of the Pre-Raphaelites and the depiction of women's hair see Virginia M. Allen, ' "One Strangling Golden Hair": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*', *Art Bulletin* (June 1984), pp. 285-94; Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA* (1985), pp. 936-54; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, 'Locks, Tresses, and Manes in Pre-Raphaelite Paintings', in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1992), pp. 159-75.

Christina Rossetti uses fewer physical descriptions and is less specific in her evocations of the female face and form than her male counterparts. Nevertheless, Christina Rossetti's women are always beautiful, usually slight and 'lily-like' with long golden hair.

The descriptions of the beauty of women and men in Pre-Raphaelite poetry (men too are beautiful, but their beauty is less often described in detail) is one of the beauties inherent in the poetry itself. Pre-Raphaelite poetry, like Pre-Raphaelite painting, overflows with the colours of the illuminated manuscript or the stained-glass window: gold, scarlet, bright blue, meadow-green. The beauty of human beings has an aesthetic function in the poetry as does the beauty of flowers, animals, fruits, jewels and fabrics.

The mirroring of psychological states through physical action can be commonplace (weeping, for example is a manifestation of an emotional state) to more pathological exhibitions of behaviour such as fits and culpable violence and hysteria. From the mental condition of the speaker of 'The Woodspurge' shown in his intense observation of the formation of the flower cups, to the wracking exorcism of love undergone by the novices in both 'The Convent Threshold' and 'From House to Home', to the suicide of Jehane in 'Golden Wings', Pre-Raphaelite poetry deals with characters whose needs and experiences are extreme.

To some readers such intensity may seem gauche or grotesque—the poetical equivalent of the crabbed spaces and awkward poses of much early Pre-Raphaelite painting. It is no accident that those who suffer in love in Pre-Raphaelite poetry seem saintlike in their agonies. Drawing on medieval mysticism and their own formulation of love as a motivating force akin to religion, the Pre-Raphaelite poets depicted sexual love as both a form of supreme ecstasy and utter torture. To their contemporaries, particularly the mid-Victorians who rebelled against Romanticism, the melodrama of anguish may have been too much; they may have distrusted and disliked such excesses of feeling. For the twentieth-century reader inured to the doctrines of Freud (and much later psychoanalytic theorists), the physicality of Pre-Raphaelite passion is very compelling, as it appears to reveal much about Pre-Raphaelite conceptions of sexuality.

The physical expressiveness of Pre-Raphaelite women is a form of 'confession' of emotional states that fills the silence where words cannot go. Much Pre-Raphaelite poetry concerns the unknowable, inexpressible limits of feeling, so that there are many silences or gaps in what may be expressed by either speech or bodily movement. But Pre-Raphaelite women are notable for their volubility. Gudrun and Guenevere in particular have much to say; for this reason they are Morris's most psychologically realistic women. The more a character talks, the more the reader feels she or he can know them, and Morris's women talk at great length and with great passion.

I will begin with an examination of the two most compelling women found in William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*: Psyche, from the verse romance 'The Story of Cupid and Psyche', and Gudrun, from the verse epic-romance, *The Lovers of Gudrun*. I will then examine the two most famous women of Malorian-derived Pre-Raphaelite lore—Guenevere, of Morris's 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb', and the Iseult of A. C. Swinburne's long poem *Tristram of Lyonesse*, contrasted with the Iseult of Matthew Arnold's 'Tristram and Iseult', and the Isolt who appears as a shadowy collaborator in Guenevere's breaking down of order in Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. It is to be regretted that Morris did not produce an Iseult of his own. Thwarted by the publication of the *Idylls*, he abandoned his plan to compose a Malorian cycle of poems, leaving us instead with his only surviving oil painting, an image of Jane Morris as *La Belle Iseult* (often titled *Queen Guenevere*).<sup>4</sup> However, in his 'Guenevere' poems we are presented with a complex, fiery queen more than large enough to measure against Tennyson's somewhat tamed and much shamed guilty queen of the *Idylls of the King*.

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<sup>4</sup> The title of Morris's painting has never been definitively decided. For example, Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), p. 111, calls the work *Queen Guenevere*, whilst Jan Marsh *Pre-Raphaelite Women* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), pp. 100-01 prefers *La Belle Iseult*.

Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (London: Quartet, 1967), p. 12, refers to Morris's first complete painting (now lost). The subject of the painting was Sir Tristram in King Mark's garden after his illness being recognised by the dog he had given to Iseult. I am inclined to identify the painting in question as a portrait of Iseult rather than Guenevere because of the presence of this little dog on the bed.

## I: The Earthly Paradise

### (i) *Psyche: Passivity and Imprisonment*

'The glory and the joy unspeakable . . .'

Happy heterosexual union is the 'shadowy isle of bliss' sought by the chief protagonists of the most important tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. Most of the twenty-four tales which constitute *The Earthly Paradise* concern romantic love. Only four tales— the slight and forgettable 'The Proud King' (April), 'The Writing on the Image' (May), 'The Son of Crœsus' (July), and 'The Golden Apples' (December)— eschew the presentation of lovers. The more important lovers of *The Earthly Paradise* are Cupid and Psyche ('The Story of Cupid and Psyche'), Ogier and Morgan le Fay ('Ogier the Dane'), John and the Swan-Fay ('The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon'), Kiartan, Gudrun, Bodli, (*The Lovers of Gudrun*), and Bellerophon, Sthenobœa, Philonœ ('Bellerophon in Argos' and 'Bellerophon in Lycia').<sup>5</sup>

In *The Earthly Paradise* much is said about love: particularly the love which suddenly springs up between young couples. This instant falling in love between young people, in which they forget that they will ever die, is a blinding realisation of the meeting of the other Platonic self; an epiphany revealing the meaning of life by paradoxically showing all else to be meaningless but for this first intense flush of love:

. . . but all the earth  
With all its changing sorrow and wild mirth  
In that fair hour seemed new-born to the twain,  
Grief seemed a play forgot, a pageant vain,  
A picture painted, who knows where or when,  
With soulless images of restless men;

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<sup>5</sup> Of secondary importance are the pairings of Atalanta and Milanion ('Atalanta's Race'), Cecily and Michael ('The Man Born to be King'), Alcestis and Admetus ('The Love of Alcestis'), The Dragon Lady and the unnamed Italian sailor ('The Lady of the Land'), The King and the Fay ('The Watching of the Falcon'), Bharam and the Fay ('The Man Who Never Laughed Again'), Pygmalion and the statue-woman ('Pygmalion and the Image'), Paris and Oeone ('The Death of Paris'), Actonius and Cydippe ('The Story of Actonius and Cydippe'), Rhodope and the King ('The Story of Rhodope'), and Aslaug and the King ('The Fostering of Aslaug').

For every thought but love was now gone by.  
And they forgot that they should ever die.  
(IV, p. 106)

Florence S. Boos claimed that the instantaneous love awakened in the young males of *The Earthly Paradise* comes as a response to 'an ideal female form'.<sup>6</sup> The hero sees the heroine and instantly and wholeheartedly desires her beauty, but the female responds to the male's beauty as much as he does to hers. Frequently bemoaned as 'types', all of the young lovers of *The Earthly Paradise* are fortunate enough to possess surpassing physical felicities and the attraction between two beautiful young bodies is undoubtedly a powerfully sexual one. But as well as being blinding, it is also binding—for life.

The lovers of *The Earthly Paradise* do not dally with one other. In accordance with fairytale and romance tradition although young and new to love they are serious lovers indeed. Their mutual commitment begins with a 'flash' of inspired attraction, but the lovers invariably marry, produce children and secure their dynasty; for much of that time experiencing such joyful satisfaction in the union of their bodies and souls that they forget that they must in time die and be forgotten on the earth that bore and nurtured them.

In *The Earthly Paradise*, particularly the first three 'adolescent' tales of spring, love is easily won, but from 'Cupid and Psyche' onwards to the end of the tales, love, although it blooms with rapturous speed, is not without the pricks of many thorns. In the spring tales love leads quickly to marriage—marriages which gain for the boyish and benign heroes of the tales their required destiny: a kingship. Recent critics of *The Earthly Paradise*, primarily Carole Silver and Frederick Kirchhoff, have written of the gradual maturing and mastery of love, and consequent growth of problems for lovers which occur throughout the seasonal year of the poem.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Boos, 'The Argument of *The Earthly Paradise*', p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> See Carole Silver, 'The Earthly Paradise: Lost', *VP*, 13 (1975), pp. 27-42, and *The Romance of William Morris*. Also see Frederick Kirchhoff, *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self 1856-1872*.

The tale of Psyche comes at the turning point between the light, sunny, spring tales, and the complexity of love and loss which comes in the summer. Psyche is a prototype poem of *The Earthly Paradise* about coming to maturity through love and thus growing to reap love's rewards. In 'Cupid and Psyche' (and several other tales, perhaps most memorably in 'The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon') the union of lovers is thwarted through a lack of trust on the part of the less powerful partner in the relationship. In most of the tales which deal with love between mortals and immortals, the more powerful partner, the arbiter of constancy in love, is a fay woman. This is the case in the tales of beneficent love between mortal men and immortal women such as 'Ogier the Dane' and 'The Land East of The Sun and West of the Moon', and the malevolent or at best ambiguous love between mortals and immortals in 'The Death of Paris', 'The Man who Never Laughed Again', 'The Watching of the Falcon', and 'The Hill of Venus'. The exception to this rule is the relationship of Cupid and Psyche. Here Cupid, the male, is appropriately godlike, dispensing and inspiring love through mastery of his trade. He punishes Psyche for her human weakness of credulity in responding to the false words of her sisters by attempting to discover what he looks like. In retaliation Cupid withdraws his love, then reinvests her with this divine love once her suffering and redemption have been completed. Psyche is one of the very few *mortal* women of Morris's creation to achieve lasting happiness in love, but this comes at the price of her mortality— Psyche's love *and* life are to be *everlasting* through death.

In *The Earthly Paradise* several mortal women are 'rescued' from unenviable fates through marriage: the deadly virgin, Atalanta, is tricked into marrying the one suitor who can outrun her; the somewhat cold Rhodope escapes a brutal peasant family by marrying a king; and the more attractive child-woman Aslaug regains her lost nobility through the same means— marriage to a king. However, the more important, mature heroines of *The Earthly Paradise* who attain mature, meaningful and *lasting* earthly happiness through love and marriage are the resourceful Cecily ('The Man Born to Be King') and the alert, energetic Philonœ (The Bellerophon tales), whilst the earthly lover Alcestis ('The

Love of Alcestis') will reap a kind of immortality through the sacrifice of her life for the life of her husband's, for which she will be remembered as one of the legendary lovers of history. Psyche's rewards after being tested are both erotic and material: the god-lover and his unearthly gardens and palace are all restored to her when she reaches immortality.

At the beginning of the tale which bears her name, Psyche's 'ideal female form' seems to be her *raison d'être*. Psyche is so beautiful that she is often mistaken for a goddess, a mistake which presages her eventual fate and one which arouses the ire of Venus. We are told that:

She was so fair, that strangers from the sea  
Just landed, in the temples thought that she  
Was Venus visible to mortal eyes,  
New come for Cyprus for a world's surprise.  
She was so beautiful that had she stood  
On windy Ida by the oaken wood,  
And bared her limbs to that bold shepherd's gaze,  
Troy might have stood till now with happy days;  
And those three fairest, all have left the land  
And left her with the apple in her hand  
(IV, p. 4)

Psyche is defined by her beauty, but the description quoted above tells us nothing of what she actually looks like: she is simply beautiful. Just as she is defined by her beauty as are all the earthly and supra-earthly women of *The Earthly Paradise*, unlike the fays (who are always sexually experienced) Psyche and the other earthly women are also defined by their virginity. In the case of the fays— and to some extent the fay-like earthly viragos, Gudrun ('The Lovers of Gudrun'), and Sthenobœa ('Bellerophon in Argos')— their eons-old sexuality is generally taken for granted in the text, yet with each new lover they are wholeheartedly and freshly moved by love. The only lovers who have qualms about the previous sexual experience of their supernatural mistresses or the men with whom they shared these experiences, are Bharam in 'The Man Who Never Laughed Again', and Walter in 'The Hill of Venus'— both dark tales. All of Psyche's so-called virtues— her beauty, her virginity, her passivity, and her trusting innocence— cause her to be loved, but at the same time cause all of her problems. Psyche is a prime example of the



ideal passively suffering heroine whose passivity must be broken in order that she might survive.

At the beginning of the tale Psyche seems so bland that she is akin to a *tabula rasa*, first inscribed by her father and sisters, then her husband, then Venus. Finally Psyche must learn to master her own destiny. Psyche may seem a curious choice as a representative woman of *The Earthly Paradise* since she is so passive, and the poem features many women who are more active, forceful, and sexually demanding than she, yet her passivity is one of the most interesting aspects of her personality. Psyche is the archetype of the dutiful daughter, loving sister, and trusting wife, except that her trust falters for an instant. She is the 'old woman' in the process of becoming the 'new woman'. She is a battered, betrayed woman who must learn to take responsibility for her own life. Psyche's story is of course a very old one, as are those of Gudrun and Guenevere and Iseult. The last three women as seen by the Pre-Raphaelites are all powerful; they create their own laws and define their own destinies. Psyche is weak. Psyche is imprisoned. Psyche suffers. Yet in the end Psyche triumphs through suffering and becomes a deity.

Psyche's first and foremost virtue/fault is her beauty. Psyche is so beautiful that although she is much admired and honoured the people are in awe of her and no-one will marry her: she is literally cursed by her beauty. While Psyche's two less beautiful sisters marry great men Psyche is destined to live chaste forever. Her beauty thus seems set to perpetuate her virginity, and with it, her innocence, forever. It seems that the unwillingness of anyone to marry Psyche comes through a curse of Venus. It seems that Psyche's great beauty has put her between two worlds: she experiences a loneliness foreign to both human women and to the amorous goddesses of her time. Venus seems to have contributed to the awe-inspiring quality of this beauty in order to produce this consequent loneliness:

Therefore, she wrought in such a wise, that she,  
If honoured as a goddess, certainly  
Was dreaded as a goddess none the less,  
And midst her wealth, dwelt long in loneliness.  
(IV, p. 5)

Venus's hatred of Psyche is born of envy, but Psyche's beauty, although extreme, is mortal. Venus knows that Psyche's 'white and red and gold' will fade while her own beauty is everlasting, but she nevertheless exerts herself with ominous majesty against an almost comically modest and weak Psyche. First Venus somehow makes people afraid of Psyche's beauty, next she plans to bring Psyche low through marriage to a poor and ugly commoner. This is a way of degrading Psyche's beauty and doing away with her virginity in one stroke: the beautiful and noble Psyche united with a humble and ill-looking man will no longer be a threat to Venus's fame because a woman's husband determines what she is— in her marriage to someone powerless Psyche's own power will be destroyed. Venus's son, the 'beautiful and pitiless' Cupid, responds with glee to his mother's plan, but his intentions dramatically change when he sees for the first time the purity and pastoral beauty of the sleeping Psyche:

Then very Love knelt down beside the maid  
And on her breast a hand unfelt he laid,  
And drew the gown from off her dainty feet,  
And set his fair cheek to her shoulder sweet,  
And kissed her lips that knew of no love yet,  
And wondered if his heart would e'er forget  
The perfect arm that o'er her body lay.  
(IV, p. 14)

Beauty is both Psyche's curse and saviour. Her bodily perfection is here signalled by one part of her body— her arm. Cupid performs what would now be called sexual assault in his caressing of the oblivious Psyche. This love at first sight is purely physical; Cupid can know nothing of Psyche aside from what he senses through the way she looks and the way he feels when he touches her. Psyche does not have the opportunity to respond to him in kind. This is an important aspect of the later relationship of Psyche and Cupid; he may love her for her beauty but she cannot love him for his as she cannot love him at first sight because she cannot *see* him. The first stage of the relationship of Cupid and Psyche will be one founded on talk and touch rather than sight.

Through *Psyche*, Morris investigates 'the effects of love on character'.<sup>8</sup> In 'The Defence of Guenevere', and in the greater part of 'King Arthur's Tomb', Morris reveals Guenevere's character through her speech, thoughts, and gestures at times of great personal crisis. 'The Defence of Guenevere' is akin to a dramatic monologue as most of it consists of Guenevere's speech, and a good part of 'King Arthur's Tomb' (a duo-dramatic monologue) consists of speech between Guenevere and Lancelot. Thus we learn very directly of Guenevere's feelings through what she says. In very long narrative poems, like the tales of *Psyche* and *Gudrun* from *The Earthly Paradise*, and the tale of *Iseult* found in Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, we see the women with whom these poems are concerned in states of successive crisis. The first of *Psyche*'s crises is facing what she thinks is her imminent death; the second of her crises is responding to her mysterious removal to a lonely paradisaical land, a Palace of Art where she dwells in splendid isolation apart from the nightly visits of her god-husband. On entering the mysterious garden *Psyche* pauses with her hand on the lock, wondering if entry into the garden will mean her death. *Psyche* characterises herself as a helpless victim of fate; so she boldly opens the gate into the garden, declaring: 'How can I 'scape the ill which waiteth me? / Let me die now!'. Here, her fatalism provokes action as well as passivity just as it will force her to open the casket near the end of the tale.

*Psyche*'s childlike fear and curiosity are emphasised by her reaction to the stunning array of curiosities and wonders displayed for her private pleasure. *Psyche*'s curiosity, like a child's, demands touch as a verification of truth as well as a sensual pleasure in its own right: 'And o'er her delicate smooth cheek would pass / The long fixed bubbles of strange works of glass'. In her loneliness, her very face grows 'strange to her', especially when she finds it reflected in a *trompe-l'oeil* pond:

At last she came unto a chamber cool  
Paved cunningly in manner of a pool,  
Where red fish seemed to swim through floating weed,  
And at the first she thought it so indeed,  
And took the sandals quickly from her feet,

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase belongs to Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, p. 18.

But when the glassy floor these did but meet,  
The shadow of a long-forgotten smile  
Her anxious face a moment did beguile . . .  
(IV, p. 19-20).

A little later she sees the reflection of her face in a real pool of water. Playing alone in the water, her loneliness bewitches her:

Till of herself at last she grew afraid,  
And of the broken image of her face,  
And the loud splashing in that lonely place.  
(IV, p. 23)

The reflection of Psyche's beautiful face is 'broken'; a child removed from her home, Psyche begins to lose her sense of self amid strange objects, denied speech with people she knows. Psyche speaks much less often than Morris's other heroines. Psyche is neither a talker nor an actor: she is easily persuaded by the words of others and she is more acted upon than acting. Nevertheless words are important to her. The silence of Cupid's palace is dehumanising; it is a form of psychological warfare with which Cupid begins his assault on Psyche's affections. Before they meet Cupid begins to ravish her senses; then he begins to use words. The air of his palace is impregnated with his presence, with Love. As Psyche wanders alone she is stirred by something she cannot hear, see or define:

And o'er her face sweet colour 'gan to steal,  
That deepended to a flush, as wandering thought  
Desires before unknown unto her brought,  
So mighty was the God, though far away.  
(IV, pp. 17-18)

Cupid magically sexually arouses Psyche before they meet. His first words to Psyche indicate that their relationship will be one based on words:

. . . thou art loved by such an one  
As will not leave thee mourning here alone,  
But rather cometh on this very night;  
And though he needs must hide him from thy sight  
Yet all his words of love thou well may'st hear,  
And pour thy woes into no careless ear.  
(IV, p. 20)

On the night when Cupid comes to Psyche his words are silken; in return for her love he promises Psyche nothing less than eternal life: 'The glory and the joy unspeakable /Wherein the Treasure of the World shall dwell'. Cupid does not rely on promises alone to convince Psyche of his majesty and the honour he pays her, he also takes out a little insurance. 'He sent a ray / Of finest love unto her inmost heart'.

Although enjoying his subsequent visits Cupid is still to Psyche that which she must 'learn' 'to call her Love'. A tutored child in the world of love, Psyche cannot bear the loneliness attendant upon her part-time role as wife-lover. Her life is a series of imprisonments; first she is imprisoned by her beauty and virginity, then she is whisked away to a nether world where she has no purpose other than to sleep with Cupid each night. She has a wondrous house and garden to tend but is not allowed the satisfaction of tending them: all household work is performed for her by invisible servants.

For Psyche love is not yet enough, and she must learn that one should not put all of one's faith in ties of blood at the expense of the ties of conjugal love. Psyche loves and trusts her sisters, but this Goneril and Regan conspire with each other; united in their jealousy of their sister, they plan to destroy her. Psyche reveals her guilelessness when questioned by her sisters about the physical appearance of her lord and husband. She forgets the very colour of her own hair which, as we have been frequently told throughout the tale, is golden. Psyche is an extraordinarily bad liar because she is an innocent. Cupid has never explained to her why she is not allowed to see him— he has merely professed love and a glorious future. Her sisters' lies cause Psyche to distrust Cupid's words. Her agonising act of mistrust— daring to look at her sleeping partner— proceeds from a dread and curiosity which is utterly human, just as Cupid's reaction to her breach of faith is appropriately pragmatic and godlike:

"O wavering heart, farewell! be not afraid  
That I with fire will burn thy body fair,  
Or cast thy sweet limbs piecemeal through the air;  
The Fates shall work thy punishment alone,  
And thine own memory of our kindness done."  
(IV p. 39)

Expelled from Paradise, Psyche is frail, exhausted by suffering, and indifferent at first about whether she lives or dies since she is in exile from love. From her expulsion onwards the narrative focus of the tale is on Psyche's search for aid in her quest to find, or rather earn, her love. Psyche's greatest moment of self-determination comes when, after assiduously obeying all of the instructions of the voice of the unnamed dead queen on her journey to Proserpine in the underworld, she dares to breach the very last taboo and open the deathly casket. Psyche finds that the casket contains what she has feared: the sleep of death and loathsome dreams. Yet Psyche will be redeemed now that her suffering is complete. Her trials come to an end, Cupid forgives her, Venus forgives her, and she is made immortal so that she can fully and permanently experience 'the joys unspeakable' which mortals cannot know.

Psyche's suffering seems unfair as does the suffering of the mortal men who betray the trust invested in them by their fay lovers. The tests are there to be failed so that the earthly lovers can suffer and thus come to be worthy of love. Frail Psyche may be more acted upon than acting, but so too is Gudrun. Gudrun, Guenevere and Iseult are all much stronger than Psyche but they too are at the mercy of fate which dictates how they will love. Unlike Psyche, they are more likely to tempt this fate with words and actions.

(ii) *Gudrun: Frustration and Cruelty*

'I did the worst to him I loved the most'.

Just as Psyche represents the suffering woman in love, so too does Gudrun. Readers of *The Earthly Paradise*, particularly those who have found most of the tales too dreamy, even soporific, for their liking, have been struck by the singularity of *The Lovers of Gudrun*. *Gudrun* is an epic, a

treatment of the medieval Icelandic *Laxdæla Saga*<sup>9</sup> which stands out from the surrounding verse romances of *The Earthly Paradise* because of both its great length (while 'Cupid and Psyche' occupies around seventy pages of Volume IV, in Volume V of *Collected Works*, *Gudrun* runs for 144 pages) and its starkness.

Gudrun is less of a 'type' than any other woman in *The Earthly Paradise*. The power of her personality is felt in the sheer number of her speeches as well as in the authority, intelligence and eloquence of these utterances. Even late in the narrative when suffering has turned her into an almost-silent shrew, her operatic gestures and acidic outbursts are magnificently telling. Coming after Morris's Guenevere of *The Defence of Guenevere* volume of 1858, she is Morris's most successful creation of a female character. Sthenobœa, from the Bellerophon tales, is almost as powerful a creation as Gudrun. She lacks, however, an essential human vulnerability that Gudrun possesses before she is hardened by misfortune. Gudrun may be perceived as a *femme fatale*. Through love of her two great men are destroyed, yet Gudrun's unhappiness and the doom of the men who love her springs as much from a malign fate that dogs her as from as her pride and her ability to inspire passion.

Gudrun's story is bound up with the story of her community. In many ways *The Lovers of Gudrun* deals with the familiar themes of the epic or saga, but Morris has moved the emphasis of the story from the male and public to the female and personal. The *Laxdæla Saga* is the story of the wars within a particular community, but Morris has told the story of a particular woman, her lovers and marriages. Morris the socialist, 'in love with the hills of the earth', wanted to believe in the possibility of perfecting a life on earth, an ideal pastoral commune, but he understood that sexual love is what makes this both possible and impossible. The ties of erotic love can bind a community together but they can also destroy it, as is the case in *The Lovers of Gudrun*.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Laxdæla Saga*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). The *Laxdæla Saga* was written in the thirteenth century based on documented events from 875-1025 CE.

The centrality of Gudrun in the tale is indicated by its title: Kiartan and Bodli, particularly Bodli, are very important characters in the narrative but in the title they, and various shadowy husbands, are defined by their relationship with Gudrun. When we first see Gudrun she looks like an atypically fair Morrissean heroine. The fifteen-year old Gudrun is stately and appealing with a maturity and graciousness fit for her position as first woman of her household. She has silky golden hair, white hands, a smooth brow, but:

... a smile began  
To cross her delicate mouth, the snare of man;  
For some thought rose within the heart of her  
That made her eyes bright, her cheeks ruddier  
Than was their wont . . .  
(V, p. 253)

Gudrun is beautiful but her countenance reveals a propensity for cruelty; her lips, for instance, are 'somewhat thin'. Whereas Psyche was a *tabula rasa*, even in adolescence Gudrun is strong. Had fate treated her kindly she may have been a happy woman, but as it is she courageously accepts her destiny even as a young woman. She responds stoically to Guest the Wise's prophecies:

"Thanked be thou; well it is!  
From thee I get no promise of vain bliss,  
And constant joy; a tale I might have had  
From flattering lips to make my young heart glad—  
Yea, have my thanks!"  
(V, p. 260)

Gudrun's spring of innocent adolescence does not last very long. As foretold in her four prophetic dreams, and their interpretation by Guest the Wise (taken directly from Chapter 33 of *Laxdæla Saga*) she will marry several times, caring for some of her lovers more than others. In her dreams the men who will be important in her life are pictured as personal ornaments— an ill-fitting coif, a silver ring, a gold arm-ring (torn asunder and flawed), and a heavy, jewelled head-dress. These dream-prophecies, as Guest says, haunt Gudrun's life and fortunes: ' . . . these things/ Shall hang over thee, as on unheard wings / The kestrel



hangs above the mouse . . . ' Throughout *The Lovers of Gudrun*, the reader, in accordance with Guest's interpretation, is tempted to match respective husbands and lovers with the costly trinkets of the dream-prophecies and at the end of the tale judge along with Gudrun the meaning of these men in her life and the quality of her love for them. Yet there can never be any doubt that Kiartan and Bodli are the preëminent 'lovers of Gudrun'.

While Psyche is almost destroyed by love, but emerges strengthened to receive her reward of eternal life through a last minute *deus ex machina* rescue at the end of the tale, Gudrun's life is complex and difficult and her failure to be unified with her 'one true love' Kiartan brings her miserable torment which warps her character, poisons her mind, and twists her motives— she is very nearly 'made a monster by unhappiness'.<sup>10</sup> Even before Gudrun meets Kiartan and the tragic chain of events which stem from this love are set in motion, Gudrun reveals the innate streak of cruelty in her character in her response to the love of her first husband. Gudrun is urged to marry Thorvald because he is prepared to give land to her family. Not only can Gudrun not love her husband, she cannot hide her contempt or show him any sign of ordinary kindness; through her barely veiled scorn and obstinate silence she frustrates this husband into violence. Gudrun's reaction to being publicly struck by her boorish but also ill-used husband anticipates the steely restraint which she will exhibit in harsher personal circumstances much later on in her life:

But in the hall, folk turned round to see  
What thing Gudrun would do, who for a while  
Sat pale and silent, with a deadly smile  
Upon her lips; then called to where she sat  
Folk from the hall, and talked of this and that  
Gaily, as one who hath no care or pain . . .  
(V, p. 271)

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Earthly Paradise* The Proud King hopes he will 'Not be made a monster by unhappiness'. The late J. M. S. Tompkins, in *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry*, comments on this phrase: 'The diminishing and depraving effect of prolonged unhappiness was something that Morris himself feared', p. 135.

Gudrun is a deadly sphinx, at all costs maintaining the public composure of silence to mask her private pain. Her mask is one of language; when threatened Gudrun will not say what she means— she plays with words just as she plays with the effects of her silence. Her husband Thorvald is easily disposed of. As Gudrun sits 'pale and silent 'in the hall she is in the process of planning a speedy divorce from this 'ill-fitting' husband.

Gudrun marries again, this time happily, and is unhappily widowed. In these days of young widowhood Gudrun meets Kiartan, her childhood playmate, and his foster cousin Bodli. When Gudrun and Kiartan meet, in accordance with the 'And they forgot that they should ever die' phenomenon, Kiartan gazes on Gudrun with 'wild hungry eyes', and Gudrun experiences a rapture which cuts her off from the surrounding world:

Ere she had time to think, all woe did pass  
Away from her, and all her life grew sweet,  
And scarce she felt the ground beneath her feet,  
Or knew who stood around, or in what place  
Of heaven or earth she was . . .  
(V, p. 275)

She has found the earthly paradise of love. From the very beginning of this love, Gudrun is more adult, more fearful in her responses than the chivalrous but boyish Kiartan. Like most of the male lovers of *The Earthly Paradise*, Kiartan is characterised by his youth, his sunniness, his pleasure in love and great deeds. He, like most of Morris's heroes, at least at the beginning of his experience of life and love, is essentially less complex and sophisticated than his female counterpart who sees into the nature of things more clearly than he. Gudrun senses an approaching time of trial and loss while Kiartan lives only for the moment, revelling in his own strength and beauty as well as responding eagerly to those qualities in Gudrun. Gudrun, at eighteen once divorced and once widowed, is more experienced than Kiartan. Yet even at fifteen Gudrun possessed an elemental majesty and poise partly derived from her prophetic dreams: she knew that any happiness she might experience would not be simple and unalloyed with pain. This knowledge cannot help her in any way, but it lends to her presence a queenliness, a wisdom,

even when she is at her most torn and tormented. Kiartan *enjoys* contemplating his new love; he rides home with his father and Bodli happily rehearsing the romantic days to come. In dark contrast to this, Gudrun goes to her bed, troubled, anxious, and yearning.

The relationship described between Kiartan and Gudrun is somewhat teenage in quality. Kiartan's love is self-reflecting and adolescent in kind: he loves Gudrun because she makes him more aware of his own splendour. Gudrun loves in the traditional woman's way, and Kiartan loves in the traditional man's way. To Gudrun love is all, to Kiartan love is the bliss which fills in the gaps between wars and adventures. On this rock their love is bound to founder. In *The Earthly Paradise* men are expected to become men through successful quests for earthly glory but this is of secondary importance to the quest for a lifetime love; the achievement of this end makes them men indeed. Kiartan should have married Gudrun before leaving for Norway, and then the saga need not have been written. Instead, stirred by stories of clashes in the North and the growth of Christianity, Kiartan is restless at home and determined to set out to cover himself in glory. Gudrun ends by being uncharacteristically submissive in her attempts to reign Kiartan in and have him stay with her. In her desire to have him stay, she urges him to leave. At first she exhorts Kiartan to allow her to share in his travels. She is queenly, confident, but glorious in her giving:

... "Is it even so,"  
She broke in, "that these feet abide behind?  
Men call me hard, but thou hast known me kind;  
Men call me fair, my body give I thee;  
Men call me dainty, let the rough salt sea  
Deal with me as it will, so thou be near!  
Let me share glory with thee, and take fear  
That thy heart throws aside!"  
(V, p. 284)

Yet Gudrun soon retracts her words: 'Let not my words be weighed / As a man's words are!' Like Shakespeare's Juliet, Gudrun throws her fortunes at Kiartan's feet, but her life is a prize he is not willing to take as yet: to him her devotion is a burden.

Kiartan is away three years in Norway where he is befriended by King Olaf, and the King's sister Ingibjorg falls in love with him. Kiartan is at first determined to hold faith with Gudrun, but cannot help enjoying being loved by a kind, attractive woman. Kiartan errs through silence, breaching, although perhaps not breaking, his vow to Gudrun. At some point in the narrative (neither he nor the reader is absolutely sure of the precise instant of recognition) Bodli realises that he too is in love with Gudrun. Once their time of agreeable imprisonment is over, Bodli returns home to Iceland, but Kiartan lingers on.

Just as the modern reader may find it difficult to condemn Psyche for wishing to see the body of her lover, so too will she or he find it hard to judge Bodli harshly for the news which he tells Gudrun. Morris's narrator appears to believe that Bodli's tidings of Kiartan are treacherously inaccurate, but they are not an entirely unfair representation of the facts. Gudrun keeps badgering Bodli in a speech which continually refers to speech:

"Speak, I fear not,  
Because so true a heart my love hath got  
That nought can change it; speak, when cometh he?  
Tell me the sweet words that he spake of me.  
Did he not tell me in the days ago,  
That oft he spake of me to thee alone?  
Nay tell me of his doings, for indeed  
Of words 'twixt him and me is little need."  
(V, p. 307)

Bodli's forced reply is ambiguous rather than an outright lie:

"What shall I saw?  
Thou may'st live long, yet never see the day  
That bringeth Kiartan back unto this land."

The scenes between Bodli and Gudrun in which Gudrun continually asks Bodli to reiterate the fact that he does not think Kiartan is coming home are brilliantly modulated. The real drama and pathos of *The Lovers of Gudrun* begins in this part of the tale. Bodli's treachery lies in stating as a fact something which he merely believes to be a possibility. Bodli tells a half-lie because of his self-tormenting love.

In time Bodli and Gudrun wed, even though it seems Gudrun half suspects Bodli of treachery. This is an 'off-stage' wedding, and the inevitable happens: Kiartan returns to find his friend and love unhappily one. Kiartan's reaction to news of the wedding is one of the most marvellously operatic moments in the tale:

He turned and staggered wildly from the place,  
Crying aloud, "O blind, O blind, O blind!  
Where is the world I used to deem so kind,  
So loving to me? Oh Gudrun, Gudrun . . ."  
(V, p. 320)

Kiartan is told that Bodli and Gudrun are happy, but it is a marriage which seals Bodli's doom-laden love and sends Gudrun mad. Gudrun's reaction to Kiartan's return is as theatrically gripping as Kiartan's response to her marriage. Gudrun becomes an avenging angel who strikes terror into her husband. She is Bodli's nemesis and conscience and she curses him as a traitor.

Kiartan's inevitable return is followed by another inevitable event—his marriage to the gentle, loving Refna, a marriage made through Kiartan's pity for Refna's lovelorn pathos. From the moment of Bodli and Gudrun's wedding their doom is sealed. This marriage eventually leads their families into chaos. Like the adultery of Lancelot and Guenevere, Bodli's decisive lie leads to terrible personal and social destruction. In the original *Laxdæla Saga* the petty crimes against each other of the respective houses of Herdholt and Bathstead (as they are named in Morris's version) were the focus of the tale. In Morris's version of the story, although the prime interest lies in the love-triangle, the objects which the two houses steal from each other have symbolic portents. The coif given to Kiartan by the King of Norway's sister, for instance, is known as 'The Queen's Gift' and, on a Freudian level, this hollow object becomes a female symbol. Likewise, 'The King's Gift' is the phallic sword. Gudrun herself may be regarded as a 'gift' from one household to another. Gudrun's love of Kiartan and marriage to Bodli sets two clans upon each other since the two men were cousins and adopted brothers. In the end Kiartan must die at Bodli's hand for the tragedy to be complete.

In the original source Gudrun is far more blood-thirsty and ironical than she is in *The Lovers of Gudrun*. For example, when Bodli returns after killing Kiartan she remarks: 'Mighty things have been done today. I have spun yarn for twelve ells, and you have killed Kiartan'. She also makes a quip at the expense of Kiartan's widow: 'Refna will not go to bed laughing tonight'. Morris has thus sometimes been accused of softening the tale, but this is an unfair accusation. As Oscar Maurer points out, the fiercely pragmatic Gudrun of the saga would seem ridiculous to the modern reader, and by omitting much of the saga and concentrating on the story of the three lovers Morris improves on his source. Using hints in the saga regarding the personalities of his three principal combatants Morris creates a compelling story full of high drama and astute psychological insights.<sup>11</sup>

Gudrun, like Guenevere, is a creature internally and externally twisted by passion. In one passage alone her wild despair over Bodli's imminent killing of Kiartan takes her from distractedly staring at her reflection, to lying motionless for hours, to gnashing her teeth and tearing her hair, to smiling madly, to soundless shrieks. It is appropriate that her reactions to the events of her life are so violent since the story is in part a story of war. Even Gudrun's life and her marriage to Bodli are conceived in warlike terms. On his way to meet Kiartan in battle, Bodli is tempted to rape Gudrun but is dissuaded by her catatonic indifference. On leaving her we are told: 'Wildly he cried: "Oh Gudrun, thou hast lost, / But look on me for I have never won" '.

It is difficult to tell what Gudrun finally thinks of Bodli. After killing Kiartan Bodli begs words of her which never come. She makes one gesture, but it is an ambiguous one:

Never any word she spake.  
No hate was in her face now: "For thy sake  
I did it, Gudrun. Speak one word to me

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<sup>11</sup> Oscar Maurer, 'William Morris and *Laxdæla Saga*', pp. 423-437. Like Maurer, I have used the name forms adapted by Morris.

<sup>12</sup> Gudrun is reminiscent of Lucrezia Borgia who devoted the latter part of her life to good works. Gudrun does not enter a convent, but like Guenevere and Maid Marian and other great women who outlive their looks and become wise women, she lives to elicit veneration and awe in the young.



poem relies on the inevitability of tragedy. Gudrun did not have the option of adultery as did Guenevere and Iseult, the two great Arthurian Queens.

## II: The Arthurians

### (iii) *Guenevere: Adultery and Queenliness*

'And in the Summer I grew white with flame,  
And bowed my head down . . .'

William Morris's Queen Guenevere is his single most dazzling creation. She is perhaps the most psychologically convincing woman in Victorian poetry. Complex and flawed, vain, egotistical, her speech riddled with evasions and near-lies, she is superbly majestic, hypnotically convinced and convincing of her own verbal skill and beauty.

Like all Pre-Raphaelite heroines she is disturbingly beautiful, but Guenevere also knows very well how to use her beauty. With the help of her oratory she constructs herself as a transparent organism, a being alive with beauty. She feels the pulse beat right through her body. Her hand is so maddeningly beautiful that it too is transparent, as she finds when she does a demonstration for her audience. Guenevere holds her hand up to the light so that she (and they) can almost see the sky and the birds in flight through her fingers:

  "... if I had  
Held out my long hand up against the blue,  
And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,  
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,  
  
"There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,  
Round by the edges; what should I have done,  
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,  
And startling green drawn upward by the sun?"  
(I, pp. 4-5)

Later in the poem she again creates herself as an emblem of beauty when she invites the audience to once more see through her *honestly* beautiful



body by observing the articulation of her words, watching them literally coming out of her body:

"See through my long throat how the words go up  
In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

"The shadow lies like wine within a cup  
Of marvellously colour'd gold . . ."  
(I, p. 8)

Guenevere's status as a consummate actor is economically signalled in the famously abrupt and riveting opening *terza rima* lines which precede her defence, lines which show her 'working' the audience prior to speaking:

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,  
She threw her hair backward from her brow,  
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,  
And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame  
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,

She must a little touch it; like one lame  
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head  
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said . . .  
(I, p. 1)

She proves to be an old-fashioned, histrionic actor who is not ashamed to ham it up, to blatantly accuse, to bend and elide the truth. Her beauty, her queenliness and her love for Launcelot are the only constants presented in the poem. The most memorable parts of the poem concern Guenevere's evocation of her early love for Launcelot. Like Psyche in Cupid's garden, Guenevere is in a state of sensual excitability approaching hysteria at the time when she and Launcelot first kiss:

"And in the Summer I grew white with flame,  
And bowed my head down— Autumn, and the sick  
Sure knowledge things would never be the same,

"However often Spring might be most thick  
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew

Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick,

"To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through  
My eager body; while I laughed out loud,  
And let my lips curl up at false or true . . ."  
(I, p. 3)

Guenevere describes herself as 'dizzied thus', and 'half mad with beauty' in an attempt to exonerate herself for the kiss, but also because it is the *truth* and she luxuriates in retelling (and hence, re-experiencing) the story of her passion. Guenevere's defence resonates with the authenticity of this passion. As Carole Silver has pointed out, it is Guenevere's potent testimony to the irresistible force of this passion and her subsequent moral confusion that convince us of her guilt in the 'crime' of adultery.<sup>13</sup>

Guenevere is renowned in legend, literature and the popular imagination for adultery and queenliness. Over the past thirty years a critical discussion about the nature of Guenevere's defence has focused on a number of broad, interrelated questions: what are the specific charges against Guenevere? Is she charged with long-standing adultery, a particular incident of adultery, or is she charged with something else?<sup>14</sup> Does she admit to adultery or any other 'crimes'? How do Morris, and the reader, respond to Guenevere's defence? And how does she position herself in relation to the judgment of her contemporaries, the judgment of Arthur and the judgment of God?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Carole G. Silver, ' "The Defence of Guenevere": A Further Interpretation', *SEL*, 9 (1969), pp. 700-701.

<sup>14</sup> Hale and Barnes Stevenson (see citation below), for instance, argue that Guenevere is accused of treason.

<sup>15</sup> The key players in this debate [listed in chronological order] are as follows: Laurence Perrine, 'Morris's Guenevere: An Interpretation', *PQ*, 39 (1960), pp. 234-41; Mother Angela Carson, 'Morris' Guenevere: A Further Note', *PQ*, 42 (1963), pp. 131-34; Meredith D. Raymond, 'The Arthurian Group in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*', *VP*, 4 (1966), pp. 213-18; Carole G. Silver, ' "The Defence of Guenevere": A Further Interpretation', *SEL*, 9 (1969), pp. 695-702; John Walter Hollow, 'William Morris and the Judgement of God', *PMLA*, 86 (1971), pp. 444-51; Dennis R. Balch, 'Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb"', *VP*, 13 (1975), pp. 61-70; Jonathan F. S. Post, 'Guenevere's Critical Performance', *VP*, 17 (1979), pp. 317-27; Carole Silver, 'Victorian Spellbinders: Arthurian Women and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle', in *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*, eds. Christopher Baswell & William Sharpe (New York: Garland, 1988), pp. 249-263

All critics agree that Guenevere is guilty of adultery. It little matters (except for Guenevere's sophistry in her defence) if she was guilty on the particular occasion of which Gawaine seems to be accusing her, or was guilty through 'the long years' of her relationship with Launcelot. We all know Guenevere is guilty of adultery: she is not Guenevere without the fact of her adultery. Readers of the poem, long familiar with the legend of Guenevere and Launcelot, would have no trouble in detecting that Guenevere is admitting to adultery, but her implied audience would be very confused by her rhetoric. In 'The Defence of Guenevere' Guenevere confesses her passion and in doing so confesses to her adultery, but at the same time exonerates herself through keeping silent on judiciously chosen issues.

This present discussion follows the work done by Carole Silver who has commented on Southey's influence on Morris in his notes to his edition of Malory. Silver claims that the Pre-Raphaelites (both painters and poets) were much influenced by Southey's views on adultery and the Arthurian women. She points out that whilst Tennyson portrays his Guinevere as 'polluted' the Pre-Raphaelites

... saw Malory's queen as hero or, at the least, as sympathetic sinner and depicted her and her sisters-in-sin, Iseult and Nimue, with admiration. . .<sup>16</sup>

Silver finds that the explanation for this was not

... that the Pre-Raphaelites were more liberal and liberated than most Victorian men . . . instead their defenses of Guenevere's sisters stemmed from their study of Malory, their views of chivalric love, and their perceptions of Arthurian women as beings of another time and order who therefore functioned under different moral laws.<sup>17</sup>

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and Virginia S. Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, 'Morris' Medieval Queen: A Paradox Resolved', *VP*, 30 (1992), pp. 171-78.

<sup>16</sup> Carole Silver, 'Victorian Spellbinders', p. 249.

<sup>17</sup> Silver, 'Victorian Spellbinders', pp. 249-50.

I think that, on the whole, the Pre-Raphaelites *were* more liberal and liberated than most Victorian men and their careers and lives bear this out. This may have begun with an internalising of Southey's views, but it certainly had a profound and lasting effect. Some of the Pre-Raphaelite men could be called bohemian. D. G. Rossetti, for instance, was involved in the *demi-monde*, and most of the Pre-Raphaelite painters married women (initially their models) from a class slightly below their own. All of these factors tended to alienate them from the conventional class morality of their time. As Lynda Nead puts the matter:

The Pre-Raphaelites are represented as a sexual and artistic avant-garde. Both their relationships with and representations of women are situated outside hegemonic ideologies.<sup>18</sup>

It could be argued, of course, that the Pre-Raphaelites were conventionally unconventional. According to Pre-Raphaelite legend, D. G. Rossetti conducted a near-interminable unofficial engagement with the ailing Elizabeth Siddall (the saint or Madonna) whilst (probably) conducting a more carnal relationship with the buxom and jovial Fanny Cornforth (whore). This is little removed from the clichéd double-sided coin of Victorian prostitution, and on that subject D. G. Rossetti's *Jenny*, a problematic and confused poem, is a core text. However, Morris was temperamentally and socio-politically more 'liberated' than D. G. Rossetti.<sup>19</sup> The earthly paradise may ideally be heterosexual monogamy, but this is not necessarily identical with the institution of marriage. In

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<sup>18</sup> Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> It is beyond the compass of this study to investigate the relationship of Morris's socialism to his feminism. However, in *News from Nowhere* on being questioned by Guest, in Morrissean matter-of-fact tones the old man outlines the position of women:

The men no longer have any opportunity of tyrannising over the women, or the women over the men; both of which things took place in those old times. The women do what they can do best, and what they like best, and the men are neither jealous of it or injured by it. This is such a commonplace that I am almost ashamed to state it. (XVI, p. 59)

the previous section of this chapter we saw the havoc and unhappiness brought about by bad marriages in *The Lovers of Gudrun*. In his novel *News from Nowhere* Morris dismisses legal marriage as a means of regulating private property; couples are free to live together, have children, part, and reunite as their feelings dictate.<sup>20</sup>

Silver, Hale and Barnes Stevenson quote Malory's summing of Guenevere: 'While she lived she was a trwe lover, and therfor she had a good ende'.<sup>21</sup> But what sort of end does Guenevere have in Morris? After her Scheherazade-like attempt to delay her execution until the arrival of her knight in shining armour (Launcelot's arrival is heralded at the very end of the poem) Guenevere's story is continued overpage where she reappears years later as a bitter religious in 'King Arthur's Tomb'.

How do we account for the change in Guenevere between the two poems? Even in 'Guenevere' we can see the beginnings of the deterioration in Guenevere's character. She has been warped by passion:

. . . She realizes, as we do, that love has partially destroyed her, driving her— but for a few sea-moments— to near madness. What she does not yet recognize is love's coarsening of her moral fiber.<sup>22</sup>

Her great love has given her the potential for lies and great hate. Yet in 'The Defence of Guenevere' Guenevere is still radiant with passion, still eager to vindicate herself as she believes that her passion deserves vindication. She is virtuous in the Pre-Raphaelite sense in which ' . . . constancy and passion in chivalric love replace[d] marital fidelity as a test of virtue.'<sup>23</sup> Must Guenevere be punished for her adultery by a passion which destroys her character?

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<sup>20</sup> See the account given of the relationship of Dick and Clara in *News from Nowhere*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Malory, *The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of King Arthur*, ed. Robert Southey (London: n. p. 1817), volume 2, p. 400.

<sup>22</sup> Silver, ' "The Defence of Guenevere" ', p. 701, n. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Silver, 'Victorian Spellbinders', p. 251.

I believe Morris is approving of Guenevere. The defence is her defence of herself, but Morris celebrates with her. The narrator of the poem breaks in only once with a remark which, in the absence of any characterisation of the narrator of the poem (he is not given a personality like John of Newcastle from 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire') invites assent: '... she stood right up, and never shrunk, /But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!' I consequently disagree with Laurence Perrine who sees Morris as an objective presenter of dramatic monologues or near-dramatic monologues:

The speakers are so many medieval knights and ladies, not Morris himself. Though most of them are good, some are bad. In 'The Judgement of God' and 'Golden Wings' the speakers are murderers, but in neither does Morris express any moral judgment. And there is no more reason for supposing that Browning is defending the Duke of Ferrara or the Bishop of St. Praxed's.<sup>24</sup>

Morris's narrator approves of Guenevere and, generally speaking, readers of *The Defence of Guenevere* cannot help but feel that Morris is more closely associated with his speakers than Browning. Morris's speaker are almost always extremely passionate, sometimes mysterious, and more often than not mad but none are especially repugnant.<sup>25</sup> To qualify Perrine's comment, there are no Dukes of Ferrara or Bishops of Praxed in the *Guenevere* volume. Furthermore, there is no murderer in 'Golden Wings' (unless this is 'self-murder') in which the protagonist, Jehane appears to kill herself,<sup>26</sup> or 'The Judgement of God', where the narrator is a knight, slightly deranged like the knight in 'The Gilliflower of Gold', but more apt to be killed than kill.

On the issue of Morris's lack of overt didacticism in 'Guenevere', Perrine states:

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<sup>24</sup> Laurence Perrine, 'Morris' *Guenevere*, p. 241.

<sup>25</sup> Except for, possibly, Sir Lambert, in the ultra violent 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End', but this poem (like 'Rapunzel') is really a short play rather than a dramatic monologue.

<sup>26</sup> Perrine may have this poem confused with the story of the same name published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in which the narrator, Lionel, mistakenly kills his father.

The temptation, of course, is to contrast Morris' exculpation of her behaviour with Tennyson's later Victorian condemnation of it. This contrast, however, is unjustified. The true contrast is between the importance of the didactic element in Tennyson and the complete absence of it in Morris.<sup>27</sup>

It is true that there is no *stated* didactic element in 'The Defence of Guenevere', except for the lines cited previously, but surely to claim that there is a complete absence of the didactic element in the poem is a shade ingenuous. It is like stating that since Morris did not speak in his own person (if that is what the commentator believes) in *The Earthly Paradise* then none of the tales is didactic in import. Throughout his works Morris's very aestheticism is didactic in itself, as is his treatment of romantic and sexual themes and his presentation of violence. Nevertheless, Perrine is correct in pointing to the 'temptation' to compare Tennyson's 'condemnation' of his Guinevere with Morris's vastly different (although, as I have said, not undidactic) handling of that character. From my position as a writer in the tremendously politically-correct atmosphere of the late twentieth century it is all too easy to condemn Tennyson for presenting us with a cringing, submissive queen cowering before the boots of the almighty Arthur. I will present a comparison of the two queens a little later. Meanwhile I wish to discover the moral background which informs Morris's Guenevere. If Morris is so admiring, so 'lenient' with his creation in the first poem, why must she suffer so in the second? Why does she have to renounce her great love?

All Pre-Raphaelite love poetry is essentially elegiac. In the lyric sequences the death of love is registered in the long, withdrawing roar of wistful silence, and in the narrative poems sexual love frequently ends in madness, bitterness, and violence. In an era dominated by domestic idylls like Patmore's and Clough's, Meredith's anti-idyll, and the domestication of legendary figures by Arnold and Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites stand out for their innovation and daring in using medieval characters and settings to construct worlds which dealt with problems of gender,

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<sup>27</sup> Perrine, p. 240.

sexuality and marriage in radical ways which make them continually arresting and rich in layered meaning.

'King Arthur's Tomb', running to 408 lines, is an even longer poem than 'The Defence of Guenevere' (295 lines). It has two speakers, and there is more narrative commentary included in the poem than in 'The Defence of Guenevere' although this is by no means objective. Rather it is 'sifted' through the consciousness of Launcelot or Guenevere. In contrast to Tennyson's *Idyll Guinevere* which is famously dominated by the figure of the ultimate patriarch, King Arthur, Arthur does not appear in 'The Defence of Guenevere' or 'King Arthur's Tomb'. In the first poem Arthur is absent, having condemned Guenevere to the stake. Guenevere refers to her husband in somewhat disparaging terms, encouraging the view that their marriage was cold and loveless:

"... I was bought  
By Arthur's great name and his little love;  
Must I give up for ever then, I thought,  
  
"That which I deemed would ever round me move  
Glorifying all things; for a little word,  
Scarce ever meant at all must I prove  
  
"Stone-cold for ever?"  
(I, p. 3)

The lines 'for a little word, / Scarce ever meant at all' have generally been taken to refer to Guenevere's wedding vow. Arthur may not be physically evoked in 'The Defence of Guenevere', but Dennis R. Balch has suggested that, subliminally at the very least, Arthur is invoked in the poem through Guenevere's employment of the parable of the choosing cloths. Guenevere asks her accusers:

"Listen, suppose your time were come to die,  
And you were quite alone and very weak . . . .  
  
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:  
  
"One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,  
Now choose one cloth for ever . . . ."  
  
"And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,  
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;  
No man could tell the better of the two.



After a shivering half-hour you said:  
 "God help! heaven's colour, the blue; and he said 'hell'."  
 (I, pp. 1-2)

Balch argues that the choice between the cloths does not apply to Guenevere's decision to engage in an adulterous affair with Launcelot; rather he claims Guenevere's marriage to Arthur is the choice she made which dooms her to hell. Blue may be 'heaven's colour' but it is also a colour which denotes coldness and spirituality, whereas red stands for blood, lust, and passion, all of which are associated with Launcelot, particularly in 'King Arthur's Tomb'.<sup>28</sup>

'King Arthur's Tomb' is a study of the erotic history of Guenevere and Launcelot. Their shared past is reinterpreted by each of them as they confront each other after being parted for many years— years of shame in which each of them has been forced to reinvent their lives. Guenevere, in particular, has been reviled as the catalyst for the fall of Camelot and the death of Arthur. In 'King Arthur's Tomb' she recalls hearing 'foulest' words, like one 'from a churl, / That curled me upon my jennet's neck / With bitter shame'. She has spent years in the convent rebuilding her life in the absence of both Launcelot and Arthur. Launcelot meanwhile has play-acted at being the Launcelot of old; but he is tired with the role, and eager but apprehensive about seeing Guenevere again. Launcelot must have suffered for his reputation as, in the words of the maid in Tennyson's *Guinevere*, 'The most disloyal friend in all the world'.<sup>29</sup> 'King Arthur's Tomb' opens from Launcelot's point of view. It is a strange narrative that slips and slides from present to past tense and back again:

Hot August noon— already on that day  
 Since sunrise through the Wiltshire downs, most sad  
 Of mouth and eye, he had gone leagues of way;  
 Ay and by night, till whether good or bad

<sup>28</sup> Dennis R. Balch, 'Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb"', pp. 61-70.

<sup>29</sup> *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Jerome Hamilton Buckley (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 450. Subsequent references to this edition by page number will be made parenthetically in the text.

He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance  
That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight  
Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,  
Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right.

Nay, he knew nothing now, except that where  
The Glastonbury gilded towers shine,  
A lady dwelt, whose name was Guenevere;  
This he knew also; that some fingers twine,

Not only in a man's hair, even his heart,  
(Making him good or bad I mean,) but in his life . . .  
(I, p. 11)

Launcelot is confused. His identity has been lost with the loss of Guenevere and his good reputation. The text in parentheses quoted above could be taken to mean that Launcelot blames Guenevere for what he is (whether that is 'good or bad'), but I do not think this is a criticism we are meant to take seriously: it is just a symptom of Launcelot's confusion. Launcelot does not speak of guilt or sin in 'King Arthur's Tomb'— this is Guenevere's role. Launcelot speaks of love, of the passion he felt, and feels, for Guenevere. Longing for the past, Launcelot conjures up memories of Guenevere which have a hypnotic intensity. He remembers a night when they stayed together in the forest (much as Tristram and Iseult did), when his love held such sway over him that he hardly dared breathe lest he wake her. This night is a night of passion without sex. It is a holy occasion, a nether world between night and morning where there are no colours. This is a world outside normal morality, where the pressure of Guenevere leaning on him or her kiss on his cheek is the utmost terrible bliss that he can bear. In a variation on the theme of 'Porphyria's Lover' Launcelot entangles himself in Guenevere's hair as they experience the perfect inarticulate hour of love:

"And she would let me wind

"Her hair around my neck, so that it fell  
Upon my red robe, strange in the twilight  
With many unnamed colours, till the bell  
Of her mouth on my cheek sent a delight

"Through all my ways of being . . ."  
(I, p. 12)

The proud queen of 'The Defence of Guenevere' in 'King Arthur's Tomb' becomes a creature terrified of God and damnation. With the passing of years she has lost the fearlessness of youth and the feeling of being a law unto herself. She is still passionate, she wants Launcelot as much as she ever did; she fantasises about him lying with his head on her breast, but she scourges herself for this longing when she wakes and the grey downs 'grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere'. Guenevere walks to meet Launcelot as one who is about to be slain. Years earlier her speech and Launcelot's arrival had saved Guenevere from an ignominious execution in 'The Defence of Guenevere'. Now Guenevere attempts to save herself again, this time not from death but from damnation. Now, in the second poem, she must defend herself against the love which she used as her defence against death in the first poem. Launcelot is the enemy since he threatens her poise and her sanity. She still loves him but she wants to believe in God, in Arthur, in heaven and the possibility of salvation.

With her waking realisation of sin Guenevere undergoes a mini-exorcism which steels her against Launcelot's charms:

At first she said no word, but lay quite still,  
Only her mouth was open, and her eyes  
Gazed wretchedly about from hill to hill;  
As though she asked, not with so much surprise

As tired disgust, what made them stand up there  
So cold and grey. After, a spasm took  
Her face, and all her frame; she caught her hair,  
All her hair, in both hands, terribly she shook,

And rose till she was sitting in the bed,  
Set her teeth hard . . .  
(I, p. 15)

This is very similar to the fits undergone by women in Christina Rossetti's 'The Convent Threshold' and *Goblin Market* and the contortions of D. G. Rossetti's Rose Mary.

In 'King Arthur's Tomb' Guenevere has attempted to transfer her allegiance from Launcelot to Christ and the memory of Arthur. She

addresses Christ as if he were a lover, asking if she is still beautiful, proffering kisses:

“... dost thou reckon

“That I am beautiful, Lord, even as you  
And your dear Mother? why did I forget  
You were so beautiful, and good, and true,  
That you loved me so, Guenevere, O yet

“If even I got to hell, I cannot choose  
But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep  
From loving Launcelot; O Christ! must I lose  
My own heart's love see, though I cannot weep

“Yet am I very sorry for my sin;  
Moreover, Christ, I cannot bear that hell,  
I am most fain to love you, and to win  
A place in heaven some time . . .”  
(I, p. 16)

Guenevere, although perhaps more ‘sincere’, and certainly more jaded in this poem than the first poem, still has her wily magic. In a certain sense this is what her verbal inventiveness (lies) and drawing of attention to her beauty have been all along— wiles. Most critics have been very admiring of Guenevere; she is a great performer who compels admiration, the kind of admiration that distorts judgment. In ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’ Guenevere’s pride and skills are slipping away and she appears merely wily rather than magnificent. Her plea for a response to her beauty now seems pathetic. She is somewhat confused over the respective roles of her love for Christ and her love for Launcelot, but she nonetheless manages to fit the two side by side just as Christina Rossetti did in *Monna Innominata*. When they meet again Guenevere treats Launcelot shrewishly. Afraid of her reactions should he get too close to her, she reviles him, making a lewd suggestion that, since they meet over Arthur’s tomb:

“Across my husband’s head, fair Launcelot!  
Fair serpent mark’d with V upon the head!  
“This thing we did while yet he was alive,  
Why not, O twisting knight, now he is dead?”  
(I, p. 17)

Guenevere refuses to grant Launcelot a parting kiss, not because she does not care, but because she does not dare. He appears to know this. Earlier, in discussing their shared past, he notes how her lack of composure reveals her continuing love: '... lo you her thin hand, / That on the carven stone can not keep still, / Because she loves me against God's command'. Towards the end of the poem she says to herself 'I shall go mad / Or else die kissing him ...'

In the end, Launcelot and Guenevere kill each other; he with his demand for a last kiss; she with her refusal to supply one. Launcelot's presence reanimates the past which she had hoped to seal, making her re-experience the intensity of passion and the intensity of guilt. In 'King Arthur's Tomb' Guenevere recalls suffering guilt and shame for her adultery in the past which was not mentioned in 'The Defence of Guenevere'. Guenevere proves her great and abiding love in 'King Arthur's Tomb' by sacrificing her own desires for the sake of that love. Guenevere will not kiss Launcelot because this kiss would cost his soul. She is eager to save her own soul, but she is also equally, or perhaps more, intent on saving Launcelot's soul: this is why she spurns him.

Launcelot and Guenevere both win and lose. They die without ever being reunited, but they die with their great love intact even if they have not avowed it to each other. Societal forms have ground them down: with the death of Arthur and the crumbling of the state the church takes over the role of father/husband/lover in Guenevere's life and later Launcelot will join a monastery. But their passion triumphs in the end for it is not diminished. Its fierceness has even grown in absence. Everything Guenevere admires in Launcelot— his earthiness, his warmth and loving vitality— is sacrificed to the spiritual ideal represented by Arthur. Guenevere is to an extent, aside from her flamboyant daring in 'The Defence of Guenevere,' a Victorian woman under the guise of her medieval dress, and she was forced to obey the laws of her time.

Morris and Tennyson had more in common with their portraits of Guenevere than is usually supposed with a comparison of the young Guenevere of 'The Defence of Guenevere' and the Guinevere who appears in the Tennyson's *Idyll* of that name, yet the older, sorrier

Guenevere of 'King Arthur's Tomb' and Tennyson's shame-ridden Guinevere have some parallels. 'King Arthur's Tomb' presents us with the last meeting of Launcelot and Guenevere, whilst 'Guinevere' presents us with the last meeting of Arthur and Guinevere. In the first poem Arthur's importance in the 'love-triangle' is thus diminished in some ways since he is dead, but increased in other ways since by being dead he has become more than he was in life; he becomes an ideal and Guenevere identifies him with Christ. The absence of Launcelot in Tennyson's *Guinevere*, however, makes him seem incidental, human and inconsequential beside the majesty of Tennyson's Arthur.

Sylvia Plath, in 'Daddy', wrote 'Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face . . .'<sup>30</sup> There is a little of this sentiment in *Guinevere*, shown in Guinevere's wish to abase herself before the pontificating Arthur who, in his own words, forgives her 'as Eternal God forgives'. Tennyson's Arthur is relentlessly regal, and today it is almost impossible to read his lofty speech delivered over the head of the distraught, 'grovelling' Guinevere without laughing. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* records that the passage where Arthur forgives Guinevere moved its author to tears.<sup>31</sup> Today Tennyson would find it difficult to find many readers to produce tears at Arthur's benediction which spring from the appropriate emotions. There has been a revolution in sensibility in the western world which has changed the reception of Tennyson's great poem; it has in some respects dated much more markedly than the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Sometimes stiff and burdened by archaisms, the Pre-Raphaelite vision of the Malorian world, particularly their portraits of Malorian women, are still intense, vivid and compelling today. It seems scarcely credible that Tennyson's pallid, contrite Queen appeared in print in 1859, just one year after the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. *Guinevere* belongs to the schema of the *Idylls of the King* and principally concerns the ideal

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<sup>30</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Edited by Margaret Drabble, 5th edition (1932; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 491.

King and his vision of pure Christian rule. In the *Idylls* sexual love is usually seen as a threatening, fearful thing: the lesson of Merlin and Nimue must always be remembered. It is significant that Tennyson makes Arthur a virgin prior to his marriage and he disavows a relationship with Modred, 'My sister's son— no kin of mine' although Modred is usually presented as the product of an incestuous union between young Arthur and his sister. Arthur's famous 'mistake' is dwelt on in detail by Arnold in his 'Tristram and Iseult' and by Swinburne in his *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

Tennyson's Guinevere is childlike in her acceptance of Arthur's version of events and her role in them. Earlier in the poem, listening to the gossipy chatter of the 'little novice', Guinevere appears as a mysterious woman of the world. Arthur reduces her to a child, a child who decides she loves him after all and decides to be good for the rest of her life so that she may meet him heaven. There is much to be said about Tennyson's *Guinevere* which is out of the range of this discussion. For instance, Tennyson creates Guinevere as a new Eve and Arthur as a new Adam and it is within these boundaries that Guinevere must capitulate to Arthur's authority. The centre of interest in Morris's creation of the Guenevere character, that of vibrant sexual love, is entirely different to Tennyson's. It is significant that very little is said of Guinevere's feelings for Lancelot in *Guinevere*. Lancelot is simply part of the shameful past, and she seems to have no passion left for him. Guinevere refers to the past at one point as 'The sins that made the past so pleasant to us', which sounds like a middle-aged bourgeois gentleman's fond reminiscences of some mild school-holiday *contretemps* rather than an adulterous liaison and scandal which led to the crumbling of a kingdom. More melodramatically, after the 'interview' with Arthur, Guinevere, refers to Lancelot in now-famous lines, thus: 'The shadow of another cleaves to me, / And makes me one pollution'. Morris's Guenevere may be trying to repent of her sin and repulse Launcelot in 'King Arthur's Tomb', but she still loves him, whilst Tennyson's Guinevere appears never to have truly loved her Lancelot.

Morris never presented a perfect earthly paradise of heterosexual union in his poetry, and unlike Christina Rossetti, Morris did not look to

heaven for the reunification of lovers. Morris's mortal lovers were entirely of the earth; and to the earth, divided, they returned. But it seems to me that Morris's dreams of perfect earthly union were realised for him by someone else. Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* took Morris's unfinished story of love to its natural, and joyful, conclusion.

(iv) *Iseult: Passion and Union*

'And their four lips became one burning mouth'.

Tristram and Iseult are well known lovers; the outline of their story is perhaps even better known to the public through Wagner's opera than the story of Lancelot and Guenevere who are known principally through film distortions like *Camelot* (1967) and *Excalibur* (1981). The legend of the love of Tristram and Iseult is a very old one. Older than the story of Launcelot and Guenevere, it was incorporated into the Arthurian legends at a late date. According to John R. Russ: 'the legend originated in the late eighth-century Pictish kingdom in Scotland whence it may be traced through Welsh, Cornish, and Breton sources . . .'<sup>32</sup> There are three twelfth-century versions of the poem:<sup>33</sup> a Norman one by Béroul, a French one by Thomas, and a German version by Eilhart, and there is a thirteenth-century version by Gottfried von Strassburg. *Sir Tristrem*, tenuously attributed to Thomas of Erceldoune, is another famous version, and the story of Tristram and Iseult, is of course, told piecemeal by Thomas Malory.<sup>34</sup> Arthurian legends were extensively revived by writers of the Victorian age. Here I will be concerned with treatments of the Tristram and Iseult myth made by three leading Victorian poets: Matthew Arnold, Alfred, Lord Tennyson and A. C. Swinburne.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Russ, 'A Possible Source for the Death Scene in Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*', *VP*, 9 (1971), p. 337.

<sup>33</sup> Another twelfth-century version, by Chrétien de Troyes, is thought to have been lost.

<sup>34</sup> See *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, p. 998.



As I have mentioned, Morris never achieved his ambition of writing an Arthurian cycle, and his painting *La Belle Iseult* is his only known representation of Iseult. In this section I will adopt Swinburne as my representative Pre-Raphaelite poet. I have commented in my Preface and elsewhere on Swinburne's status as a Pre-Raphaelite poet. Despite Swinburne's own protestations about such a label being applied to his work, I will treat *Tristram of Lyonesse* as a nominally 'Pre-Raphaelite' work. In its celebration of sexual love *Tristram of Lyonesse* follows the path laid down by Morris and the Rossettis which they could not quite follow to the end. Like the three principal Pre-Raphaelite poets Swinburne exalts sexual love, presenting vivid portraits of lovers and celebrating their passion in highly evocative sexual scenes. Some sad fatalism in Morris prevented him from writing quite such a full blooded, ecstatic view of sexuality. Christina Rossetti, dissatisfied with the sexual politics of earth, was preoccupied with heaven. Most of the passion in her poetry is a passion thwarted, erupting from beneath the tense surface of her poems, and hers is a poetry of perpetual desire and departure rather than union. D. G. Rossetti could never decide what type of creature a woman was, and his poetry of sexual love suffers as a result: the communion of lovers can last for only one 'inarticulate hour', never longer. Perhaps because of his 'paganism' and his reckless spirit of adventure, Swinburne was able to write of a love which was truly lasting and truly consummated.

All Pre-Raphaelite love poetry jointly praises sexual love and mourns its passing, but nowhere in the balladry or longer narrative poems of the Pre-Raphaelites do characters achieve satisfactory and lasting union. The passion is there, but the union always falters through some constraint of society or the individual. For all its faults, *Tristram of Lyonesse* is in some ways the greatest Pre-Raphaelite love poem; just as the legend of Tristram and Iseult, as Denis de Rougemont contends, is probably the western world's greatest and most perennially affecting love story.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 50.

Swinburne first revealed his consuming interest in the Tristram and Iseult myth soon after his first meeting with Morris. The resulting unfinished poem, *Queen Yseult*, is often regarded as a pastiche of Morris's early poems. Swinburne had, after all, just heard Morris read 'The Defence of Guenevere', and the resulting *Queen Yseult* reads like a homage to pictorial Pre-Raphaelitism. Like Morris, Swinburne contemplated for a time writing a full Arthurian cycle of poems. Swinburne mocked the *Idylls*, or as he called them, the *Morte D'Albert*, at every opportunity; so it is perhaps surprising that he did not write more Arthurian poems. As it is he wrote four: *Queen Yseult*, 'Lancelot', 'Joyeuse Garde'<sup>36</sup> and *Tristram of Lyonesse*. These poems are largely juvenilia. Their interest lies in their position in the history of the Victorian revitalisation of Arthurian myths rather than any intrinsic value they might possess. The legend of Tristram and Iseult, for instance, is far too long and complex to be well served by the jaunty and flippant rhythm with which Swinburne wrote his early poem, *Queen Yseult*. *Queen Yseult* opens with an account of the birth of Tristram in the forest to his mother Queen Blancheflour. The poem then tells of Tristram's killing of the evil King Moronde and his first meeting with his uncle King Mark. In Canto 2 Tristram goes to Ireland to bring Iseult home to his uncle. Tristram falls in love at first sight:

And he knelt with heart aflame,  
Took her robe in sight of them,  
Kissed the skirt and kissed the hem.  
(*Bonchurch*, I, p. 24)

This is a love of courtly devotion with no expectation of further intimacy but the drinking of the love potion immediately changes the nature of their relationship: the two become lovers. Iseult is characterised, like many Pre-Raphaelite heroines, by her hair, but the talismanic nature of her hair almost subsumes the woman. Iseult is constantly referred to in terms of her hair. She is first described thus:

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<sup>36</sup> See *The Complete Works of A. C. Swinburne*, The Bonchurch edition, volume I. Subsequent references to this edition will be indicated parenthetically by volume and page numbers in the text.

Even as her face grew fair  
In a light of glowing hair  
Grew the tresses bright and bare.

For no crown the maiden had  
But with tresses golden-glad  
Was her perfect body clad.

And no gems the maiden wore  
But the bright hair evermore  
All her warm white limbs bore.  
(*Bonchurch*, I, p. 23)

Queen Yseult seems a veritable Lady Godiva wearing nothing but her light, bright hair. When Tristram and Iseult take the potion their first real physical intimacy is signalled by Tristram stooping to kiss that hair. She is his in terms of her hair, which is at the centre of all the erotic imagery in the poem:

Tristram had her body fair,  
And her golden corn-ripe hair,  
And her golden ring to wear.  
(*Bonchurch*, I, p. 31)

*Queen Yseult* stops at a point in the narrative where Tristram has married the second Yseult out of pity but has kept his troth to the first Yseult and it is to be a 'maiden marriage'. Like Yseult's hair *Queen Yseult* is light and bright, an opaque, quickly moving narrative with bold touches of colour, principally focused on the sheen on Yseult's hair, just as *Tristram of Lyonesse* will be illuminated by the bright skins of the lovers. Yseult is the centre of the poem named after her, and it is Tristram's passion for her, rather than hers for him, which is the focus of the poem. Yseult is a radiant, goddess-like creature with considerable seductive power and physical strength. For instance, Queen Yseult carries Tristram on her back to their appointed trysting place so that their enemies, looking for evidence of their adultery, will discover only one set of tracks in the snow.

In discussing the character Iseult one must always remember that there are two Iseults. The first (and usually most important) Iseult is sometimes known as Iseult of Ireland. Tennyson says very little about

the second Iseult, often known as Iseult of the White Hands or Iseult of Brittany, and she does not appear in person in *The Last Tournament*, but she is a very important character in Arnold's poem; indeed Barbara Fass Leavy argues that she is *the* most important character in Arnold's poem and she is certainly very important in Swinburne's poem.<sup>37</sup>

Arnold focuses on the dying Tristram. Attended by the pretty, ringleted Iseult of Brittany, Tristram deliriously raves while he awaits a last visit from his original love. The work is a poetic drama with an appended epilogue which sits a little uneasily with the main text. The story is essentially a happy one: a middle-aged, worn out Tristram sees his old love for the last time, and they die together overseen by the second Iseult. This second Iseult is a gentle Angel in the House who has assiduously kept house for Tristram, borne his children and been forced to retire into the furthest recesses of lamplight as her predecessor and rival takes centre stage and claims the second Iseult's husband in death as she had in life. Arnold Victorianises the medieval story; his poem focusses on a middle-class, bourgeois death-scene. The dying paterfamilias gathers his family around him (he has been an exemplary husband and father), but he is revealed to be a paterfamilias with a past.

Arnold ignores one of the most prevalent endings of the myth which sees Iseult of Brittany take revenge on Tristram and Iseult for her mock-marriage. In *Tristram of Lyonesse* Swinburne adheres to this ending: his second Iseult is made vicious by jealousy and self-righteousness and wreaks her revenge. Iseult's revenge is made possible by the fact that she overhears a message which her brother Ganhardine will take to the first Iseult. Tristram sends Ganhardine to Cornwall bearing a ring with a message to Iseult, begging her to come and see him one last time before he dies. If she consents to come and is aboard the ship, on the ship's approach to Brittany Ganhardine should present white sails to indicate her arrival; if she is not on board the sails should be black. Swinburne's Iseult of Brittany hastens Tristram's death and circumvents a reunion in life between her husband and her rival by lying about the colour of the

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<sup>37</sup> See Barbara Fass Leavy, 'Iseult of Brittany: A New Interpretation of Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*', *VP*, 18 (1980), pp. 1-22.

sails. She tells Tristram that the sails are black and he dies. Iseult of Ireland arrives to find Tristram dead and she too dies; and their union in death as in life is sealed with a kiss: 'And their four lips became one silent mouth'.

Swinburne's Iseult of Brittany, like D. G. Rossetti's Sister Helen and Lilith (to be discussed in the next chapter) has good reason to take revenge; she has been forced to live married but a virgin with a husband who periodically abandons her to live with his mistress. Deprivation leads to madness and evil. Iseult of Brittany becomes corrupted by hate after Tristram and Iseult's prolonged absence at Joyeuse Garde and wills herself to become an instrument of God's punishment, becoming corrupt and demonic: her mind 'like a field of graves'. Just as Tennyson, in *Guinevere*, made Arthur a virgin aside from his relationship with his wife (ignoring his previous liaison with his sister), so Arnold purifies and distorts the myth by endowing Tristram and his wife with bourgeois respectability. His Tristram and Iseult are a fruitfully married couple. In Swinburne's *Queen Yseult* and his *Tristram of Lyonesse*, Tristram and Iseult have a 'maiden marriage' because Tristram will not break his vow of faith to the first Iseult and consummate his marriage, however much he feels tenderness and pity for his (initially) sweet and trusting bride. But Arnold's couple have two small children, pictured in chocolate-box sentimental terms:

One little wandering arm is thrown  
At random on the counterpane,  
And often the fingers close in haste  
As if their baby-owner chased  
The butterflies again . . . .  
— Ah, tired madcaps!<sup>38</sup>

This is a 'second marriage'. Iseult of Ireland got a young dashing musician, and Iseult of Brittany got a listless old man. The return of Iseult of Ireland seems like the return of an old girlfriend. Tristram and the original Iseult are no longer young, and their love is largely a matter

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Arnold*, poems selected by Kenneth Allott and introduced by Jenni Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 82.

of memory since they have been so long apart. Iseult disparages herself, telling Tristram that Iseult the younger would hardly be jealous of her rival if she could see how wasted her beauty is, how thin and pale her cheeks, while he would wonder at his love of her if he saw the older and the younger Iseults standing together. This could be a veiled demand for flattery, but we do not even know if it contains a true representation of the Queen's aged beauty since we do not have the opportunity to see her face. At the end of the poem Iseult is pictured for the reader: she is dead, her face pressed to Tristram's, her form hidden by her flowing, jewel-strewn hair.

Much of the grandeur of the original stories is lost in Arnold's telling which seems uncertain of its direction. The structure of the poem, most of it being told in 'flash-back' reveries, would have presented difficulties to readers not familiar with the legend. Modern commentators have regarded the final section of the poem, 'Iseult of Brittany', with mixed views. In this section the widowed Iseult, a year after the deaths of Tristram and Iseult, plays with her children in a 'cirque of open ground' near the sea, and tells them stories of 'an old-world Breton history'. This Iseult is still childlike herself but very tired: 'She seems one dying in a mask of youth'; her days are lonely and monotonous, every tomorrow is 'To-day's exact repeated effigy'. After telling us this the narrator-voice intervenes in a passage decrying the unhappiness dealt to people through 'the gradual furnace of the world', but mostly he condemns 'this fool passion' which destroys lives, whether it manifests itself in 'ambition, or remorse, or love'. Then, at last, the narrator reveals the story which Iseult of Brittany had told to her children. It is the story of Merlin and Vivian. Out riding one today they stop to rest and Vivian puts a spell on Merlin, encasing his spirit in a tree: 'For she was passing weary of his love'.

This tale has caused dissent amongst critics. J. L. Kendall, for instance, sees Iseult's story as evidence of her perpetual childishness stating: 'The story pleases her now in the same way that it did when she was a child'.<sup>39</sup> Barbara Fass Leavy has provided a much more convincing

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<sup>39</sup> J. L. Kendall, 'The Unity of Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*', *VP*, 1 (1963), p. 145.

reading of Iseult's response to the tale. Leavy sees Iseult's attraction to the story of Merlin and Vivian as an example of female fantasy; she believes that in her retelling of the legend the good wife and mother, Iseult of Brittany bodies forth her envy of her rival Iseult. Iseult of Brittany wishes to be a 'bad', sexually dominating woman—a witch or a fay like Vivian. The last line of the poem 'For she was passing weary of his love' seems to confirm Leavy's hypothesis. Iseult has had no opportunity to become 'passing weary' of Tristram's love since it was never fully hers. She is forced to remain in one place, tending her children until the end of her life, but in fantasy she imagines herself as the wicked Vivian or Nimue with the power to entrance men and leave them spell-bound while she wanders at will.

Tennyson's Tristram and Isolt of *The Last Tournament* are both debased characters. In some respects Tennyson's Tristram can be seen as an heroic character: although he may be amoral he remains true to his nature; he is a free roving man of the forest who espouses free love and finds Arthur's ideal of knighthood impossible and wrongheaded.<sup>40</sup> As Kerry McSweeney indicates, I believe Tristram is a far more attractive character than those who read from the perspective of Arthur would appreciate, but he is also abhorrent, particularly in his comments to the woman who weeps for her absent lover in the forest: 'Yet weep not thou, lest if thy mate return, / He find thy favor changed and love thee not'.

Tennyson's Isolt is a kind of bored housewife whose love for Tristram is a love informed by hatred of her husband King Mark. Isolt loves Tristram because she hates her husband Mark. She reiterates this constantly throughout the last meeting of she and Tristram which constitutes the ending of *The Last Tournament*. On Tristram's arrival she claims to have sensed his presence thus: ' " . . . I felt my hatred for my Mark / Quicken within me, and knew that thou wert nigh." ' A little later on she makes the relationship of her love and hate perfectly explicit: ' "My God, the measure of my hate for Mark / Is as the measure of my love for thee!" ' . Even Tristram tires of it, telling her that he loves her

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<sup>40</sup> For an argument of this kind see Kerry McSweeney, 'Tennyson's Quarrel with Himself: The Tristram Group of Idylls', *VP*, 15 (1977), pp. 49-59.

better when Mark's name is not constantly on her lips and chiding her for her frequent reference to her husband as 'My Mark': ' " I am here; / Let be thy Mark, seeing he is not thine" '. Indeed, Isolt seems more interested in her hatred for her husband than her desire for her lover.

The love of Tennyson's Tristram and Isolt is presented as an animalistic appetite; they must eat and drink before rounding off their physical comforts with sex. It is an old love, seen as more a habit than an exhilarating passion. Isolt speaks of her 'strong joy' to see Tristram again, but for the most part they bicker, Isolt disgusted with Tristram over his lack of faith to her in marrying her namesake, and Tristram thinking how to 'smooth over' this over so that during his time with her they will pleasantly satisfy their mutual appetite. Isolt pleads for lies—for Tristram to tell her that he will still love her when she is old and grey and in despair—but he will not oblige her. Tristram is realistic, but hardly chivalrous, in his refusal to make this avowal. Tennyson does not mention the love-potion in his delineation of Tristram and Isolt. Without the love-potion which makes them fall in love and binds them together for a certain length of time these two are simply willing adulterers who will soon tire of each other.

In Swinburne's poem, and Arnold's, the love between their respective Tristrams and Iseults is not treated as something entirely dependent on the love-potion for its continuing effect. The effect of the potion may be tragic in the long run but the love of the two is nonetheless seen as a noble and ennobling thing. It should be pointed out that not all versions of the Tristram and Iseult story feature a passion which is life-long. In some versions the effects of the love-potion simply 'wear off' after a number of years and the couple have no further ties between them. Arnold and Swinburne present the passion as permanent, but Tennyson's Tristram, minstrel of 'free love', who has already married Isolt of Brittany because he liked her name, cannot be supposed to have a maiden marriage; if he had not been killed by King Mark he would probably have moved on to love another lady once he fully tired of Isolt.

The ending of Tennyson's poem, most probably derived from Malory, is perfectly in accord with the nature of the lovers as Tennyson



has presented them to us. *The Last Tournament* is a dark, complex philosophical tale concerned with images of corruption. Much of the tale centres on the ironically named 'Tournament of the Dead Innocence'. Lancelot and another knight found a tiny baby in an eagle's nest draped in a carcanet of rubies. Guenevere nursed the child but it died. The tournament, named after the dead child, has as prize the ruby necklace. The tournament, a tawdry, bloody affair is, of course, in reality named after the steadily corrupting court. The fool Dagonet, who is the most important character in this idyll after Tristram and Isolt, has some buoyancy in his attacking of Tristram's amorality but is, at the end, utterly dispirited. Arthur returns home to the tearful Dagonet who tells him: 'I am thy fool, / And I shall never make thee smile again'. Tristram and Isolt, successors to Lancelot and Guinevere, are at the heart of this corruption. Tristram dreams that the two Isolts quarrel over the red carcanet which turns to blood in their hands. At the end of *The Last Tournament* as Tristram kisses Isolt, fastening the rubies around her neck, Mark cleaves him through the brain.

The title of Swinburne's mature treatment of the Tristram and Iseult myth, *Tristram of Lyonesse*, invokes only the name of the hero and Tristram certainly looms larger in the narrative than Iseult but she is still an arresting and important figure. Swinburne had few options as to the title of his poem as Arnold had published his 'Tristram and Iseult' in 1852 and Tennyson's *Last Tournament* first appeared in 1871. Swinburne was very fond of the Tristram and Iseult legend—it was his favourite of the Celtic myths and he disliked both Arnold's and Tennyson's poems. Swinburne quite deliberately designed his poem with Arnold and Tennyson's versions of the legend in mind. Arnold's 'Tristram and Iseult', according to Swinburne, 'has transformed and recast the old legend' and 'Tennyson—as usual, if I may be permitted to say so—has degraded and debased it'.<sup>41</sup> Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* is thus a self-conscious attempt to do his best by a legend which was very dear to him by outperforming Arnold and Tennyson. He was determined to stick to

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<sup>41</sup> Cecil Y. Lang, ed. *The Swinburne Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-62), volume IV, p. 260.

the basics of the story without being submerged in plot details. The Tristram and Iseult stories have almost countless plot-permutations. Swinburne retained only the broadest and most fundamental components of the story because he wanted to concentrate on the centre of the poem, the lovers, and he did so in a type of poem which for many years attracted more criticism than praise. *Tristram of Lyonesse*, as has been pointed out often in recent years, is not principally concerned with narrative. Instead Swinburne was interested in presenting a series of dramatic scenes: the intent of the poem was thus lyrical rather than narrative. The reader may flounder in the text due to an absence of a strong narrative drive. Details of plot are submerged under a welter of high-flown, sometimes purple, and often exhausting and exhaustive language. But the merits of the poem lie in the richness of this language and the portraits of Iseult and Tristram.

Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* begins with a lengthy 'prelude' or invocation to love, then goes on to describe the voyage in which Tristram escorts his uncle Mark's bride from Ireland to Lyonesse in Cornwall. On this voyage the two mistakenly drink the love-potion brewed by Iseult's mother (who intends it to seal love between King Mark and Iseult on their wedding night) and instantly fall in love. The rest of the poem traces the effects of this one act on the lives of the two, in times of separation and in times of unity, until their deaths. The love-potion is the central fact of the Tristram and Iseult legend. It is significant because it very much lessens the responsibility of the pair for the adultery which they enter into: they behave under the law of 'diminished responsibility' because of this magic which has changed their lives. The love-potion is the ultimate symbol for that passion which defies understanding, which takes us beyond ourselves and gives us an understanding of the infinite.

In Arnold's poem the love-potion is referred to as 'that spiced magic draught, / Which since then for ever rolls / Through their blood, and binds their souls, / Working love, but working teen' (grief or misfortune). Although the potion is the tie which decisively brings the couple together in both Arnold and Swinburne's versions of the affair, and is seen, in part, as something dark and tragic in both, neither poet implies that this love could not have occurred in time without the

potion. Swinburne makes much of the growing power of attraction between the young Tristram and Iseult— they are both beautiful, innocent, and they admire each other exceedingly. Swinburne spends a lot of time describing Iseult's interest in love, and how her thoughts of love circle, but not quite touch, Tristram. She and Tristram talk of the love affairs of Camelot, such as that of Arthur and Morgan le Fay (called Morgause here). This is a delicate form of flirtation: the two talk of great loves whilst simultaneously appraising each other's charms. Iseult's questioning of the rightness of God bringing judgment upon Arthur and Morgause in the form of Mordred is very similar in essence to the parable of the red and blue cloths put forward by Guenevere in 'The Defence of Guenevere'. According to Tristram, Arthur and Morgause did not know that they were committing an act of incest. Therefore Iseult does not think they should suffer unduly for their fault. Both Guenevere and Iseult resist hard and fast judgments of human morality. If human beings do not punish those who act in innocence, Iseult protests, why must God :

"Great pity it is and strange it seems to me  
God could not do them so much right as we,  
Who slay not men for witless evil done;  
And these the noblest under God's glad sun  
For sin they knew not he that knew shall slay,  
And smite blind men for stumbling in fair day."  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, p. 45)

It seems inevitable to the reader that Tristram and Iseult will fall in love, but Swinburne points out that, as close as they have been to falling in love 'naturally', the agency of the potion is their destiny or 'fate' for which they must wait: 'Yet was not love between them, for their fate / Lay wrapt in its appointed hour at wait'. On board the ship the couple become progressively more and more like lovers. As Swinburne makes clear, their similarity to lovers is very striking: 'And his face burned against her meeting face / Most like a lover's thrilled with great love's grace / Whose glance takes fire and gives'. Arnold too, presents a happy young couple aboard a ship, enjoying each other's company— natural candidates for mutual love in every way. Iseult, the picture of youthful

innocence: 'That first Iseult, princess bright, / Chatting with her youthful knight / As he steers her o'er the sea'. We glimpse Arnold's couple only very briefly before the effects of the potion overtake them. Nevertheless they share with Swinburne's couple and Arnold's couple a supreme likelihood of falling love. Both couples seem supremely suited to falling in love with each other at that particular time and in that particular place. Swinburne devotes pages of preliminary description of the future lovers, recording their conversation which in a courtly manner is genteel and flirtatious but which deals with serious issues as they discuss the 'fatal attractions' of Arthur for his sister and of Merlin for Vivien. As Antony H. Harrison points out, this talk of love and its fatal consequences acts as a 'chorus of foreboding' as it leads up to their quaffing of the potion.<sup>42</sup>

The potion compels physical intimacy and takes away responsibility for their actions, particularly in the moment of that first, intense kiss which follows on the drinking of the potion, a kiss which seals the effect of the potion in uniting them forever. It appears that in Swinburne's poem the kiss is followed by sex between the two which takes place on board 'The Swallow' before it reaches Lyonesse. The lovers of *Queen Yseult* certainly have sex on the ship. The full act of sexual intercourse would seem to be a fitting explanation for the quasi-mystical memories which the couple have of that night:

Nought else they saw or heard but what the night  
Had left for seal upon their sense and sight,  
Sound of past pulses beating, fire of amorous light.  
Enough, and overmuch, and never yet  
Enough, though love still hungering feed and fret,  
To fill the cup of night which dawn must overset.  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, p. 58)

This intimacy continues apace during the first night after the arrival of Tristram and Iseult at Lyonesse. On her wedding night Iseult substitutes her ever-obliging maid Brangwain for herself in the marital bed. In the morning Iseult appears beside her new husband, fresh from spending the night with Tristram, with, we are told [a] 'face yet passion-coloured,

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<sup>42</sup> Antony H. Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry*, p. 101.

amorous red / From lips not his [Mark's]. . .' Thus, Iseult's marriage is mocked before it begins by her activities with Tristram on board ship, which are followed by the bed-trick substitution which continues for some nights allowing Iseult to be with Tristram.

Later on, Tristram and Iseult spend three months together in the forest. Their love and vow-making is the occasion for some of the most erotic and philosophically significant statements about romantic/sexual love made in the poem. Swinburne's treatment of sex, in the passage quoted below, is very reminiscent of D. G. Rossetti's treatment of the same subject in the coyly titled and for a long time effectively banned, sonnet from *The House of Life*, 'Nuptial Sleep':

Only with stress of soft fierce hands she prest  
Between the throbbing blossoms of her breast  
His ardent face, and through his hair her breath  
Went quivering as when life is hard on death;  
And with strong trembling fingers she strained fast  
His head into her bosom; till at last,  
Sate with sweetness of that burning bed,  
His eyes afire with tears, he raised his head  
And laughed into her lips; and all his heart  
Filled hers; then face from face fell, and apart  
Each hung on each with panting lips, and felt  
Sense into sense and spirit in spirit melt.  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, p. 69)

There is much repetitious material in *Tristram of Lyonesse*: there are innumerable blossoms and foam flowers and 'transcendental' sounding phrases which describe the union of Tristram and Iseult like the last line quoted above. Yet still, Swinburne is radically direct in his representation of sexuality and the sexual act. Some of his work in *Poems and Ballads* (1868) seems designed to shock, and Swinburne is renowned for his own sexual proclivities, but, in old fashioned terminology, *Tristram of Lyonesse* is his healthiest and most natural exploration of human sexuality.

Tristram and Iseult, after their first supreme sexual union in the forest, for sheer happiness wish to make a suicide pact. Their union seems so complete that it is difficult to tell which character is talking, except that Tristram is presumably the bearer of the sword:

"Hast thou no sword? I would not live till day;  
O love, this night and we must pass away,

It must die soon, and let us not die late."  
"Take then my sword and slay me; nay, but wait  
Till day be risen; what, wouldst thou not think to die  
Before the light take hold upon the sky?"  
"Yea, love; for how shall we have twice, being twain,  
This very night of love's most rapturous reign?  
Live thou and have thy day, and year by year,  
Be great, but what shall I be? Slay me here;  
Let me die not when love lies dead, but now  
Strike through my heart: nay, sweet, what heart hast thou?"  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, pp. 69-70)

This scene is interesting in a number of respects: it enshrines the idea of the perfect hour of love and sex so prevalent in D. G. Rossetti's poetry and also familiar from 'Porphyria's Lover', and it also points to a gender difference in the responses of the couple. Iseult says that should their love die Tristram can go on performing great deeds without her, but that her greatness lies in this love. Her words smack of Christina Rossetti's 'Men think and work but women feel' and Tennyson's view that love for women was the whole world. Yet for the most part Tristram and Iseult seem equally committed to their existence as lovers; their love affair is the single most important event of both their lives.

Alone, at Tintagel, Iseult shows that her view of her 'sin' and her relationship with her God is quite different to that shown by Guenevere in 'King Arthur's Tomb'. Iseult prays:

Shall I more love thee, Lord, or love him less  
Ah miserable! though spirit and heart be rent,  
Shall I repent, Lord God? shall I repent?  
Nay, though thou slay me! for herein I am blest,  
That as I loved him yet I love him best—  
More than mine own soul or thy love or thee,  
Though thy love save and my love save not me.  
Blest am I beyond women even herein,  
That beyond all born women is my sin,  
And perfect my transgression: that above  
All offerings of all others is my love,  
Who have chosen it only, and put away for this  
Thee, and my soul's hope, Saviour, of the kiss  
Wherewith thy lips make welcome all thine own  
When in them life and death are overthrown;  
The sinless lips that seal the death of sin.  
The kiss wherewith their dumb lips touched begin  
Singing in heaven.  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, pp. 96-7)

Many readers at the time would have found this passage utterly blasphemous.<sup>43</sup> Swinburne self-consciously sets Iseult against God. Swinburne, the perfect poet-transgressor, often conflates erotic and biblical language, but here the result is genuinely impressive rather than bearing the taint of a Wildean kind of clever-daring as it too often does. Iseult challenges God's right to judge her. More than any other Pre-Raphaelite heroine she is proud of her love and defines herself in relation to that love. Iseult does what Guenevere was in the end too afraid to do.

Both Tristram and Iseult are depicted as akin to deities in *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Both are elemental figures, connected to the sun and sea and wind. The story is structured around two sea trips, the sailing of the Swallow, which takes Tristram and Iseult to Mark, and the sailing of the Swan, which brings Iseult to the dying Tristram. The young Tristram and Iseult seem peculiarly at home on the sea. Tristram is often represented as a swimmer and man of the sea as well as a musician and hunter. Early in the poem, Iseult experiences a complete sensual identification with the dawn which is described in ornate, voluptuous detail, as an orgasmic epiphany:

And her heart sprang in Isleut, and she drew  
With all her spirit and life the sunrise through  
                                ...she felt  
Through her own soul the sovereign morning melt,  
And all the sacred passion of the sun;  
And as the young clouds flamed and were undone  
About him coming, touched and burnt away  
In rosy ruin and yellow spoil of day,  
The sweet veil of her body and corporal sense  
Felt the dawn also cleave it . . .  
And as the august great blossom of the dawn  
Burst, and the full sun scarce from sea withdrawn  
Seemed on the fiery water a flower afloat,  
So as a fire the mighty morning smote  
Throughout her, and incensed with the influent hour  
Her whole soul's one great mystical red flower  
Burst, and the bud of her sweet spirit broke  
Rose-fashion, and the strong spring at a stroke  
Thrilled, and was cloven, and from the full sheath came  
The whole rose of the woman red as flame:

<sup>43</sup> Christina Rossetti pasted strips of paper over certain blasphemous passages in her copy of A. C. Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*. See Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 353.

And all her Mayday blood as from a swoon  
Flushed, and May rose up in her and was June.  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, pp. 46-47)

This kind of intense quasi-spiritual/erotic language could be simply annoying and, admittedly, there is too much of it in *Tristram of Lyonesse*, but at times it is curiously impressive. But what did Swinburne mean by it: is it just metaphysical claptrap? Antony H. Harrison and Kerry McSweeney have examined the philosophical underpinnings of Swinburne's presentation of Tristram and Iseult. Kerry McSweeney sums the meaning of the whole poem thus:

The main theme of the poem, to which everything in it is subordinated, is the dignity and grandeur of a purely naturalistic vision of life. The poem is about man's relation to the natural world, about the need to be free of imposed moral categories and any sort of supernatural beliefs, and about the meaning and finality of death.<sup>44</sup>

In his insistence on a naturalistic view of the universe Swinburne comes very close to the philosophy of William Morris. In the Seasonal Lyrics Morris examined the relationship of one man to seasonal change, love, and death, but the speaker found that no matter how much he wanted to believe that the diurnal nature of existence must be accepted and no longer painfully fought he could never quite reconcile himself to personal mortality. Swinburne, through the story of Tristram and Iseult, accepts death and abandons God. He replaces God with twin universal forces: Love and Fate. As McSweeney points out, love in this sense is not supernatural at all: it is 'the active, generative force which enlivens and sustains all things' and 'the principle of order and harmony in the universe which keeps the "choir of lives in chime"'.<sup>45</sup> The meaning and importance of Tristram and Iseult's great love lies in their absolute dedication and openness to that love. Along with God, the concept of sin is banished in this poem. Iseult confronts God. She must therefore

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<sup>44</sup> Kerry McSweeney, 'The Structure of Swinburne's "Tristram of Lyonesse",' *Queens Quarterly*, 75 (1968), p. 690.

<sup>45</sup> Kerry McSweeney, ' "Tristram of Lyonesse" ', p. 692.



believe in God in order to risk her immortal soul by defying him, but defy him she does. During her vigil, Iseult speaks of herself as a harlot, but there is no sense of crippling shame in Iseult as there was in Guenevere. There is only pride and fierce defiance. I have written of the love-potion as a device which, in many versions of the legend, serves to remove or at least lessen the guilt over adultery which attaches itself to Tristram and Iseult, but in Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* there is no such guilt. In McSweeney's words: 'There is no suggestion in the poem that they are guilty of anything, nor that they have fallen at all'.<sup>46</sup> Their transgression is after all 'perfect'. There is no sense of Christina Rossetti's 'hope deferred' in this poem. Love is purely terrestrial. There will no meeting in heaven (or hell) for Tristram and Iseult. The physical entities called Tristram and Iseult may not endure, but they convince us of the power of love. King Mark, usually a villain in most of the stories (in *Tristram of Lyonesse* he is cold and lean, and in *Queen Yseult* he is both cold and lean and a bitter alcoholic) is, at the end of the poem, touched by this innocent, unwished-for love and forgives them for his own pain in a way that the tormented Iseult of Brittany could not. Their bodies may be hidden but their story, their significance, will never be lost:

For many a fathom gleams and moves and moans  
The tide that sweeps above their coffined bones  
In the wrecked chancel by the shivered shrine:  
Nor where they sleep shall moon or sunlight shine  
Nor man look down for ever: none shall say,  
Here once, or here, Tristram and Iseult lay:  
But peace they have that none may gain who live,  
And rest about them that no love can give,  
And over them, while death and life shall be  
The light and sound and darkness of the sea.  
(*Bonchurch*, IV, pp. 167-68)

In Morris's *The Love of Alcestis*, Alcestis sacrifices her own love to make her husband well again; this great act deifies her after her death. Tristram and Iseult who have defied death will be deified by love. Like the young lovers who meet and are instantly attracted to each other in *The Earthly*

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<sup>46</sup> McSweeney, p. 695.

*Paradise*, for an instant forgetting that they will one day die, Tristram and Iseult conquer death:

But like a babbling tale of barren breath  
Seemed all report and rumour held of death,  
And a false bruit the legend tear-impearled  
That such a thing as change was in the world.  
And each bright song upon his lips that came,  
Mocking the powers of change and death by name,  
Blasphemed their bitter godhead, and defied Time.  
(IV, pp. 67-8)

Harrison has written of the unity of Tristram and Iseult in death:

Death is, however, what permanently allows the unity they have experienced transiently in their lovemaking and that Tristram perceives as the dominant fact of nature. Indeed, Tristram displays enough visionary instinct by the poem's end to reconcile himself to the facts of Fate, to change and death, though he is unable to perceive them as beneficent aspects of the world-force, Love. His peculiarly eager resignation resembles Iseult's impulse to explore love's "last possible eminence," death, as a potential source of consummate joy.<sup>47</sup>

The legendary lovers Iseult and Tristram achieve a peace that was unobtainable for Christina Rossetti's, William Morris's, and D. G. Rossetti's fantasy lovers who will be examined in the following chapter.

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<sup>47</sup> Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism*, pp. 127-8.

## Chapter Five

### Erotic Histories

#### The Fantasy of Pre-Raphaelite Passion

#### Note

'Yea, some men sing, what is it then they sing?  
Eh? Launcelot, and love and fate and death . . .'



RE-RAPHAELITE sexual fantasy is largely played out in 'faery lands forlorn'. These are the bizarre ether-worlds of Christina Rossetti's nun figures and the pastoral landscapes of her sisterhood poems; the muddy and bloody Froissartian world of Morris's knights and ladies and the swooning suffocation of his entowered and entombed fantasy figures; along with the world of the sexually ravenous and sexually ravaged of D. G. Rossetti's medievalised ballads.

This chapter is about sexual love and sexual politics in the fantastical and pseudo-historical ballads and longer lyrical narratives of Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti. The poems with which I will deal in this chapter such as Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, William Morris's 'Golden Wings' and D. G. Rossetti's 'The Blessed Damozel' have often been considered typically 'Pre-Raphaelite'. These are glamorous, self-consciously 'poetic' works, yet they are much more complex than they first appear; rather than being purely decorative, these mysterious, often weird poems reveal much about Pre-Raphaelite conceptions of sexual love, and relationships between the genders.

#### I: Nuns and Maidens

##### Christina Rossetti

##### (i) *Nuns*

'Ofttimes one like an angel walked with me . . .'

Men figure in Christina Rossetti's poetry largely by their absence. As seen in Chapter One, Rossetti's is largely a poetry of the solitary female self. In

*Monna Innominata* and *Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente*, for instance, the male lover was silent. Furthermore this silent man was not once physically described: he was both faceless and formless.

It is only in her fantasy poems, whether they be the quasi-sexual/religious 'Nun' poems or the quasi-sexual/sociological 'Maiden' poems, that Rossetti describes the male and gives him a voice. In these poems we witness the interactions of lovers and find that the male (who has more status, experience and authority than the female) presents himself as the women's saviour. The male promises to 'take her away from all this', but he invariably proves treacherous, unfaithful, or even deadly. In the end the female is as she once was: solitary, embittered, still craving for that unspecified thing which she names 'love', unless she learns to triumph in the integrity of self as she does in *Goblin Market*. In this chapter I will examine two broad categories of male lovers: the ambivalent angel-figure who instructs/seduces novices and the rural nobleman or goblin figure who is the wooer of innocent country maidens.

In Rossetti's poetry sexually-implicated maleness is often attributed to God and to Jesus. Jesus is the suitor whose imminence causes the orgasmic transformation of 'A Pause', God will take the heart abandoned by man in 'Twice', and God is the third member of the love-triangle presented to us in *Monna Innominata*. In 'The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness' ('When all the overwork of life') Rossetti's speaker reviles an earthly suitor for his inability to penetrate and satisfy her being:

You scratch my surface with your pin;  
 You stroke me smooth with hushing breath;—  
 Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,  
 Probe my quick core and sound my depth.  
 (III, p. 266)

She voices instead a yearning to be completely merged with Jesus: 'I full of Christ / And Christ of me'.

The angels who appear in several of Rossetti's poems are caught somewhere between man and God. These ambiguous creations appear in 'The Dead City', 'Repining', 'The Convent Threshold' and, most

significantly, 'From House to Home'.<sup>1</sup> These figures have knowledge and powers which extend over both heaven and earth, but they are not purely spiritual beings; rather they exert a fascination upon the vulnerable, erring heroines and dominate them through their sexual attractiveness rather than their spiritual authority. They are sexually teasing spirit guides who use their maleness as bait in order to guide the woman's soul along the path to salvation.

Both 'The Dead City' and 'Repining' are about young women bored with their state of loveless solitude, who long to be delivered into the outer world and are admonished for their desires. These poems may be seen as early examples of the dichotomy which would persist throughout Rossetti's writing career between the ascetic and the sensuous, the religious and the sexual. I have called this sub-section 'Nuns' because the young women in these poems are novice-like. In 'The Dead City' and 'Repining' the young women are sexually and socially inexperienced and are filled with desire for such experience. In 'From House to Home' the woman seems a slightly more mature version of these heroines. She is starving for experience and is wrung with passion for the angel-figure.

'Repining', was first published in *The Germ*, but was not reprinted in the author's lifetime. The poem features a young woman who, longing for love, begs someone to come to her and relieve her loneliness. This Lady of Shalott/Mariana figure will recur throughout Rossetti's later poetry and, as we shall see a little later in this chapter, it will be echoed in the early poetry of William Morris. Rossetti's young woman is led into the outside world by an angel-figure who presents to her successive visions of death and destruction. William Michael Rossetti claimed that the moral of the poem is 'Solitude is dreary, yet the life of man among his fellows may easily be drearier; therefore let not the solitary rebel.'<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Dead City' was composed in April 1847, 'Repining' in December 1847, and 'From House to Home' in 1858.

It is difficult to classify Rossetti's early poems as 'Juvenilia'. 'The Dead City' seems an immature work but some of Rossetti's most accomplished and well known poems were written during the same period such as Song ('When I am Dead my dearest'), composed in December 1848, and 'Remember', composed in July 1849.

<sup>2</sup> 'Notes', *Poetical Works*, p. 460.

statement does not satisfy the peculiarities of the poem any more than the end-moral of *Goblin Market* ('For there is no friend like a sister') unravels all of the complexities of that poem. Both 'Repining' and 'The Dead City' describe a woman's journey from a state of solitude into an outer world in which people are dead or dying. In 'Repining' the heroine is guided by a visible, seemingly physical, angel-figure, whereas in 'The Dead City' the girl rambles alone. Although 'Repining' was written only eight months after 'The Dead City' it seems a far more mature work. The earlier poem is muted in effect; its most striking passages being descriptions of luscious fruit which anticipate the enchanted fruits of *Goblin Market*. 'The Dead City' deals with enchantment, but the reasons for this enchantment remain unclear. The people the young heroine encounters have been turned to stone, and she is guided to a viewing of them, not by a visible physical presence, but by a voice which whispers 'Go and see the end of pride'. The frozen people seem temporarily enchanted rather than dead; capable of reinvigoration like the stone fauns, dryads and giants of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. They are also, of course, reminiscent of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who were punished for their iniquities by being turned into pillars of salt. Ultimately, 'The Dead City' appears confused, its moral uncertain. Yet its use of the guiding, admonishing voice prefigures the admonishing guides which would appear eight months later in 'Repining', then eleven years later in 'From House to Home'.

The woman who spins 'the weary thread away' in 'Repining' craves companionship just as the woman of 'The Dead City' had done. She moans: 'Come, that I be no more alone', the mating song of the doves reminding her of her solitariness. It is clear that the woman pines for sexual love:

"Come; that I be no more alone."  
Day followed day; and still she sighed  
For love, and was not satisfied;  
Until one night . . .  
(III, p. 18)

Like Tennyson's Mariana, the woman of 'Repining' calls for love as the moonlight turns the trees outside silver-white, recalling the poplars which shielded the moated grange. The woman's solitude is broken by the arrival of an angel. The woman hears 'A steady hand undo the door'. This announcement of the entry of the angel into the woman's bedroom recalls 'A Pause' where a dead or dying woman hears or senses 'Upon the lock the old familiar hand'. The supernatural males from both 'Repining' and 'A Pause' enter the women's bedchambers without knocking, knowing it is their supreme right and duty to enter and lead the woman bodily away by taking possession of her will in a form of ravishment. The woman of 'Repining', discovered in her bed, trembles 'like a frightened child' or virgin at the coming of the angel until she notes that he 'seemed a fair young man', although the aureole around his head and the light which emanates from it would seem to give the lie to the impression of ordinariness given by his pleasant facial features:

She trembled like a frightened child,  
Till she looked up, and then she saw  
The unknown speaker without awe.  
He seemed a fair young man, his eyes  
Beaming with serious charities;  
His cheek was white, but hardly pale;  
And a dim glory, like a veil,  
Hovered around his head, and shone  
Through the whole room till night was gone.  
So her fear fled.<sup>3</sup>

This scene is strongly reminiscent of D. G. Rossetti's later oil painting (for which Christina Rossetti modelled) *Ecce Ancilla Domini* or *The Annunciation* (1850). The pose of the girl in the painting is fearful, she cowers away from the angel-figure who confronts her with a lily, his feet on fire. She is young, virginal, and is wearing what looks like a hospital

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<sup>3</sup> See *Revelations*, I:

13. . . . one like to the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot . . .

14. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire.

nightgown.<sup>4</sup> In 'Repining' does the woman's fear fade because she sees that the intruder is a 'fair young man', or because she sees that he is a heavenly being? Perhaps she sees that he is both; he could be her ultimate sexual fantasy: a beautiful, supernatural, authoritarian figure.

The angel presents himself to the woman as the one for whom she has waited, the literal answer to her prayer: 'Damsel, rise up; be not afraid; / For I am come at last'. This greeting has many biblical parallels, particularly with Jesus as The Bridegroom, but the woman responds in an ordinary human way. At first she seems a little apprehensive of the nature of the being whom she has 'called up' or invoked who, at her invitation, has entered her bedchamber.

Upon his arrival, as if anticipating that he will immediately lead her away from her home, the woman begs him to stay so that they can come to know each other in the daytime. Here she addresses him as if he were a new lover:

"Now thou art come I prithee stay,  
 "That I may see thee in the day,  
 "And learn to know thy voice, and hear  
 "It evermore calling me near."  
 He answered: "Rise, and follow me."  
 But she looked upwards wonderingly:  
 "And whither would'st thou go friend? stay  
 "Until the dawning of the day."  
 (III, p. 19)

She seems to be asking that they cement their relationship in the daylight of human commerce rather than in the night of sorcery, demons and dangerous delusions. Like Psyche, the young woman cannot help but be goaded into fear and suspicion of the invisible being she loves at night but cannot validate by the cool day of human reason. The young woman desires love and companionship, but the angel has places for her to go and things to show her.

The journey undertaken by the angel and woman, reminiscent of the 'journey' taken by Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas*

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<sup>4</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 44, volume 2, plate 29.



*Carol*, rather than being a physical journey is a journey made by astral essences. The woman is compelled to leave with the angel and wander with him through conjured realms which do not exist by day and travel distances which could not be traversed in a single night by a wholly human couple. The guide's magical powers are immediately evident: hedges open before his hand to let them pass and streams dry up so they can cross the land.<sup>5</sup> The universe created by the angel is so quiet and unruffled at first by either man or beast that we may intimate that he has stilled the world in limbo in order to 'reveal' successive scenes of the life and death of certain communities which are intended to admonish the young woman.

Like the spirits of Christmas past, present, and future, the guide reveals to the woman a series of visions, nightmare scenes of 'small Armageddons'. First they witness a village become buried in an avalanche, next they see some mariners drowning, then a city on fire. It seems that these things have not happened in the past, neither are they representations of future events. Rather the destruction is enacted in the limbo of the present and is *caused* by the angel-figure in order to teach the woman a lesson. In their travels the woman and the angel confront desolation and death after death, leading the woman to exclaim: 'Death—death— oh let us fly from death! / Wherever we go it followeth' as if they themselves are grim reapers. They confront one last horrifying vision of ruin and disaster and the joint culpability of the guide and the woman is here evidenced by the fact that the grass withers 'Beneath *their* feet' 'and in *their* bosom was the thunder' [my italics]. The final vision is of bleeding corpses ('heaps') and the dying lying on a battlefield.

In despair, the woman kneels and prays forgiveness for her 'heart's prayer'. According to William Michael Rossetti the woman's prayer or desire is for a longing for companionship over solitude, but he

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<sup>5</sup> As she expounds in *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, n.d.), p. 19, Rossetti believed in the literal existence of angels:

Angels are superior to many natural laws which bind us: recognised or unrecognised they appear as from empty space, they may vanish yet remain present.

overlooked the sexual nature of her longing. The angel's lesson is that we must all live in a community and bear the price of such a life, or we must make the best of what is given to us even if this is isolation. The young woman, unhappy in her solitude, wishes for one to share it with her, but this attitude is blinkered and irresponsible. She must take up her duties rather than selfishly hiding away with her love. The woman has somewhat blasphemously prayed for a lover as an antidote to all her sufferings and must therefore be punished. Her punishment is suited to her crime; she is presented with a desirable, fair young man who will teach her a lesson. Like the burning city shown to her which is surrounded by a great deep river, companionship through salvation is always near her and she need never be alone. The heavenly figure, in tempting her flesh sets out to admonish her soul.

The violence of the images of life in the world shown to the woman in 'Repining' makes one wonder whether the angel is here acting as an authoritarian figure representing the patriarchal Victorian male. The poem was written early in Rossetti's career at a time when she may have been anxious about how her vocation would be viewed by a society which wished to restrict the activities of women to the private rather than the public sphere. Both her social milieu and her religious convictions told Rossetti that she should stick to the private sphere rather than enter the dangerous public sphere, but the women in her poetry find the private sphere too lonely without sexual companionship.

This theme is developed at great length in one of Rossetti's unacknowledged masterpieces, 'From House to Home'. Here the relationship between the woman, the angel-guide and her salvation is explored at great length. The opening of the poem, as I have stated earlier, owes much to Tennyson's 'Palace of Art'. It describes a state of self-delusion using the time-honoured castle of dreams:

My castle stood of white transparent glass  
Glittering and frail with many a fretted spire,  
But when the summer sunset came to pass  
It kindled into fire.  
(I, p. 82)

The glass, light and fire recall the architecture of heaven in 'The Convent Threshold':

I choose the stairs that mount above,  
Stair after golden skyward stair,  
To city and to sea of glass . . .  
I seek the sea of glass and fire . . .  
Lo, stairs are meant to lift us higher:  
Mount with me, mount the kindled stair.

Both of these visions derive from *Revelation* 4.6: 'And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal'. Throughout 'From House to Home' we are reminded that the 'pleasure-palace within my soul' is nothing but a bitter delusion. Following the description of the palace and garden we are introduced to the one who visits the woman in her delusion, in the process making it infinitely more desirable. His ambiguous, perilously sexual nature is well-described:

Ofttimes one like an angel walked with me,  
With spirit-discerning eyes like flames of fire,  
But deep as the unfathomed endless sea  
Fulfilling my desire:

And sometimes like a snowdrift he was fair,  
And sometimes like a sunset glorious red,  
And sometimes he had wings to scale the air  
With aureole round his head.

(I, p. 83)

The white and red are suggestive: white usually indicates innocence or purity and red usually indicates passion: the changeability of the angel's appearance thus signals his ambiguity. This angel-figure is more to the woman than merely a pleasant companion; this is made clear in lines 53 onward which describe the continual growth of the woman's love for him. In her growing joy she becomes isolated from reality, not feeling the thorn prick her and not noticing his sadness. Then comes an enigmatic exchange between the woman and the angel, summarising a philosophic disagreement which leads to their separation:

"Tomorrow," once I said to him with smiles:  
"Tonight," he answered gravely and was dumb,  
But pointed out the stones that numbered miles  
And miles and miles to come.

"Not so," I said: "tomorrow shall be sweet;  
Tonight is not so sweet as coming days."  
Then first I saw that he had turned his feet,  
Had turned from me his face . . .  
(I, p. 84)

In 'Repining' I pointed out that the woman's emphasis on daylight meant a longing for the human over the supernatural; here the woman looks forward to the following day, favouring the human future over the spiritual present recommended by the angel. The woman avoids preparing herself for death and salvation by blindly insisting on putting off the task until the never-coming tomorrow. The angel knows that the task of achieving salvation is not an easy one. He had intended to gradually coax the woman into abandoning her delusion and coming to Christ, but his presence as teacher has lengthened the process for she has come to love him and in loving him wants no part of the 'night' of judgment. Impatient with the woman's refusal to come to terms with the need for immediate action, the angel tries to save her by abandoning her. He cries for her to follow him: 'Come home, O love, from banishment'.

A spiritual death and rebirth follow. At first the woman refuses to accept the loss of her loved one. Rossetti movingly describes the woman's feverish, anguished search for her vanished lover as a metaphorical destruction of her being, since it is delusion which has sustained her:

That night destroyed me like an avalanche . . . .

O love, I knew that I should meet my love,  
Should find my love no more.

"My love no more," I muttered, stunned with pain:  
I shed no tear, I wrung no passionate hand,  
Till something whispered: "You shall meet again,  
Meet in a distant land."

Then with a cry like famine I arose,  
I lit my candle, searched from room to room . . .  
(I, p. 84)

Like Laura of *Goblin Market*, this woman collapses, having been denied the nourishment to which she has become addicted. She is starving with a hunger which is both sexual and spiritual. The woman is destroyed by an 'avalanche', since her sexual need has been crushed by notions of pure spirituality. She also resembles Psyche, who, abandoned by Cupid in a grand, empty mansion, forlornly searched for love. Psyche is eventually rewarded for her suffering and hardship by having her lover restored to her, but the woman of 'From House to Home' will learn to accept another destiny. The woman hears spirits discuss her fate—whether she should die or live—deciding that they will help her to live. The woman is then presented with a mystic vision of a woman undergoing a trial; taunted with thorns in her feet, this woman survives, for she is metaphorically and literally 'linked' to heaven by a 'chain of living links'. This trial is made in order to strengthen the woman's faith, for it is her very self that she discerns in her vision.

Next comes a long ecstatic account of the forthcoming joy of the day of judgment which details a Dantean heaven similar to that described by D. G. Rossetti in 'The Blessed Damozel'. This vision of the splendid unity of all souls with God is meant to convince us that the 'house' of delusion was well lost for the 'home' of divine love and acceptance. Yet, as the poem enters into a discussion of things heavenly, it rather appropriately loses touch with reality and it is difficult for the reader, and perhaps Rossetti herself, to prefer the 'pure' spirituality, the harps, crowns and moon-lit faces of the saved, to the more intriguing magic of the 'curious sudden stool / That perfects in a night' which thrives in the 'house of lies'. At the very end of the poem we are told:

Altho' today I walk in tedious ways,  
 Today His staff is turned into a rod,  
 Yet will I wait for Him the appointed days  
 And stay upon my God.  
 (I, p. 88)

'The rod', often a sexual image, reminds us of the torture which has so recently been endured. The poem ends with an affirmation of faith and stoicism which is somewhat difficult to accept. The woman has been

won over to God through pain. The dream-vision of the suffering woman was little more than a sadomasochistic fantasy. The ultimate admonishment— torture— has been brought to bear on the woman for her sexual longing. She has tried to sublimate this desire into an acceptance of the long-away heaven ruled by a god who dispenses justice and comfort with a rod and not with a staff. Purged, flayed, burned of sexual desire, this woman will do just that.

Rossetti found a freedom to transgress sexual and social mores in her fantasy poems which were unavailable to her elsewhere in her work. In the 'nun and angel' poems sexual craving appears masked as a desire for community or for heaven, whilst in the maiden poems, as we will see, sexual rapacity appears in a variety of guises.

## (ii) Maidens

'At cock-crow we were sister-maids,  
We may be brides at noon'.

Christina Rossetti's long poem *Goblin Market* may yet prove to be one of the most consistently intriguing problems bequeathed us by the nineteenth century. The initial conundrum all readers of *Goblin Market* must face is: 'What kind of poem is this?'<sup>6</sup>

The indefatigable William Michael Rossetti reported Rossetti's disingenuous but apt comment on the poem:

I have more than once heard Christina say that she did not mean anything profound by this fairytale— it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> An adaptation of the following discussion will appear in the journal *Victorian Poetry* in Spring 1996 under the title 'Absinthe Makes the Tart Grow Fonder: A note on "wormwood" in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*'.

<sup>7</sup> 'Notes', *Poetical Works*, p. 461.

Indeed, *Goblin Market* is not a 'moral apologue consistently carried out in detail'. It is a *number* of moral apologues *inconsistently* carried out in details; this is what gives it its multiplicity of meanings.

As Rod Edmond stated in 1988, *Goblin Market* 'has perhaps been re-read more extensively than any other Victorian poem'. For example:

In recent years it has been read as a Christian allegory; a feminist Christian allegory with a female Christ figure; an allegory of sexual desire; a female rites of passage poem; a lesbian manifesto; a poem about the erotic life of children; a metaphoric statement about patterns of social destructiveness in Victorian England; and in psychoanalytic terms as a power struggle between mothers and children'.<sup>8</sup>

*Goblin Market* is still, almost daily it seems, generating new readings. To Edmond's list I would add: an allegory of self and sisterhood; male and female exchange in the Victorian marketplace; vampirism, and female appetite and anorexia.<sup>9</sup>

The self and sisterhood themes of the poem seem to me to be very important. Laura and Lizzie are clearly aspects of one psyche, but they are also clearly sisters and thus discrete beings. Lizzie *does* act as a female Christ-figure in the sacrifice she makes for her sister through the buffeting she endures and her delivery to her of the means of redemption. The goblin fruit *resembles* the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it also connotes many other things. One of the most sensible comments made thus far about the nature of the

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<sup>8</sup> Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative*, p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> See two seminal articles, Winston Weathers, 'Christina Rossetti : The Sisterhood of Self', *VP*, 3 (1965), pp. 81-89, and Dorothy Mermin, 'Heroic Sisterhood in *Goblin Market*', *VP*, 21 (1983), pp. 102-18.

More recent approaches include Elizabeth Campbell, 'Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *VS*, 33 (1989), pp. 375-410; Mary Wilson Carpenter, ' "Eat me, drink me, love me": The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *VP*, 29 (1991), pp. 415-34; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, 'Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *ELH* (1991), pp. 903-33; David Morrill, ' "Twilight is not Good for Maidens": Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism', *VP*, 29 (1991), pp. 1-16; Deborah Ann Thompson, 'Anorexia as a Lived Trope: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *Mosaic*, 24 (1991), pp. 89-106, and Terence Holt, ' "Men sell not such in any Town": Exchange in *Goblin Market*', *VP*, 28 (1990), pp. 51-68.

goblins and Laura's experience of the fruit came in 1965 from Winston Weathers:

The goblins, obviously, are some state of mind, some mental experience that is both attractive and destructive, both exotic and visionary and at the same time it is immensely real. One would not go too far astray, it seems, to recognize in the goblins and their wares a kind of imaginative, fanciful, visionary—even hallucinatory—state of mind that is escape from reality, beautiful escape at the same time it is intellectually destructive . . . No doubt sex and sensuality are there, but other mysterious regions of the mind and the self also exist that lure one to psychological death.<sup>10</sup>

Although some recent critics have discussed female appetite and anorexia in the poem, none to my knowledge have examined the physicality of Laura's addiction to the fruit and the nature of her cure. On her second taste of the goblin fruit obtained for her through Lizzie's mediation Laura reacts violently: 'Her lips began to scorch / That juice was wormwood to her tongue'. The following discussion hinges on the phrase: 'That juice was wormwood to her tongue'. What does this mean? Most commentators appear to have assumed that 'wormwood' is merely a synonym for 'bitter'. This may be true in part, but an examination of the literal and symbolic meaning of 'wormwood' adds much to our reading of the nature of Laura's experience of addiction, life-threatening illness, the 'fit' and her recovery.

Wormwood is absinthe. *The Oxford English Dictionary* states that 'wormwood' is the plant 'Absinthium or wormwood', its proper name is *Artemisia Absinthium*. 'That juice was wormwood to her tongue' refers to Laura's sensations on supping the secondhand goblin fruit, but 'wormwood juice' is a colloquial term for absinthe.

Absinthe is well known as a very bitter emerald green liqueur (made from an extract of wormwood) which was traditionally poured over a perforated spoonful of sugar into a glass of water where it then turned opaque white. In Victorian times special glasses were made with a ledge

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<sup>10</sup> Winston Weathers, 'The Sisterhood of Self', p. 82.



for positioning the sugar cube.<sup>11</sup> Absinthe was believed to stimulate creativity and was a favourite tippie of writers and painters: Van Gogh, Lautrec, Baudelaire, Wilde, Verlaine, Gauguin, Rimbaud, and many others were enamoured of 'The Green Muse'.<sup>12</sup>

Absinthe is approximately 78% alcohol. It was banned in Switzerland in 1908, France in 1915, and the United States of America in around 1912. Absinthe is still available in Spain and reputedly in Denmark and Portugal. A recent article stated that home-made absinthe is becoming a fashionable drink in Seattle.<sup>13</sup>

Absinthism is a disease resembling alcoholism arising from the abuse of absinthe. The symptoms of alcoholism and absinthism are almost identical: addiction, hyper-excitability, hallucinations, brain damage, sleeplessness, tremors and convulsions. (Laura appears to be suffering from absinthism *before* she receives the antidote). Although akin to alcoholism, it seems that absinthism is not the *same* as alcoholism, since the toxic effects of absinthe reside in the oil of wormwood itself rather than simply the alcohol produced by it. One commentator has it on good authority (from those who have tried it!) that the intoxicating effect of absinthe is quite different to the intoxicating effect of alcohol.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Much of this and the following information is drawn from a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document by Matthew Baggot available Internet e-mail: [bagg@ellis.uchicago.edu](mailto:bagg@ellis.uchicago.edu) for distribution on the Usenet newsgroup alt.drugs. I am grateful to Doug Gardener of the Department of History, Miami University of Ohio for providing me with this source. I am also grateful to the many individuals who posted to the mailing list 'Victoria: The Electronic Conference for Victorian Studies' for sharing factual and anecdotal information about absinthe. (Available via Internet e-mail from [Victoria@iubvm.ucs.indiana.edu](mailto:Victoria@iubvm.ucs.indiana.edu)). See discussion beginning 18th September, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> See paintings of absinthe drinkers by Degas, Manet, and Picasso.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Back to Xanadu, via Seattle', *Newsweek*, (August 29th, 1994), p. 62 on the prevalence of popular Victorian drugs such as opium, laudanum and absinthe in present day Seattle.

<sup>14</sup> Modern relatives of absinthe are pernod (absinthe without wormwood), ricard and vermouth (made from the flower-heads of wormwood, the name comes from the German word for wormwood: 'wermuth').

Much of the toxicity of absinthe comes from thujone, a convulsant which makes up 40 to 90% (by weight) of the essence of wormwood from which absinthe is made. The presence of thujone could explain Laura's convulsions following receipt of the goblin fruit. Simple bitterness could not on its own account for the cathartic flailing about of her body. During her fit, Laura literally foams at the mouth: 'Like a *foam*-topped waterspout / Cast down headlong in the sea, / She fell at last'. (I, p. 24, ll. 519-21, my italics). The goblin fruit, once luscious, 'Sweeter than honey from the rock, / Stronger than man-rejoicing wine' has metamorphosed into the toxic wormwood. Like the diabetic who collapses and is given sugar in order to revive them Laura is cured by tasting the poison that has caused her decline. Like most addicts, Laura's second longed-for 'taste' makes her sick. The 'rush' or high experienced by heroin addicts frequently makes them vomit, alcoholics may recoil at the smell and taste of alcohol on the 'morning after' and find the experience of drinking their first glass toxic, but after a while the symptoms of the disease balance out and they reach a plateau level once more as the toxins redistribute themselves around their body. This is what happens to Laura. The goblin fruit has become toxic to her senses, but this has the effect of curing her because it is an *antivenene*: she is cured by a hair of the dog that bit her.

Wormwood is a vermifuge. A vermifuge causes or promotes the evacuation or expulsion of worms or other animal parasites from the intestines. Wormwood, like camphor, can also be used for killing moths or larvae. Laura undergoes a purging, an exorcism in which her body convulses, her limbs writhe, her hair streams. Her body is racked by a parasite ingested with the goblin fruit, and this metaphysical parasite (the parasite of desire for the fruit), is expelled with Laura's seizure. The poison effects the cure. In the past wormwood has been used as a medicine or tonic. Absinthe was popularised by French soldiers returning from fighting in Algeria in the 1840s where they used wormwood additives in their wine to prevent fever. After her taste of wormwood Laura's fever gradually abates and she is level-headed and level-tempered once more. Laura as the fallen woman, the prostitute or tart who sold her virginity (a curl of golden hair from her head) for a forbidden substance which led to her addiction, is now cured and amiable

once again. Laura's period of unrestrained sensuality/sexuality, evident in her both lascivious and childishly greedy consumption of the fruit ('She sucked and sucked and sucked the more . . . She sucked until her lips were sore'), her wasting illness caused by sensual/sexual appetite and excess (anorexia or sexuality denied and depleted<sup>15</sup>) and her unbridled licking of her sister's face and throat, is now past. Laura has run the gamut from curious child to experienced and embittered adolescent to contented matron. She becomes a matron who, as is often noted, like her sister, appears to have added to the matrilineal line without the benefit of men.

Laura suffers in the poem, but she is never condemned. The passage containing (in a phrase of Jerome McGann's) 'unspeakably beautiful litanies'<sup>16</sup> describing Laura and Lizzie's sleep comes *after* Laura has first tasted the fruit forbidden:

Golden head by golden head,  
Like two pigeons in one nest  
Folded in each other's wings,  
They lay down in their curtained bed:  
Like two blossoms on one stem,  
Like two flakes of new-fall'n snow,  
Like two wands of ivory  
Tipped with gold for awful kings.  
(I, p. 16, ll. 185-198)

Laura does not die like Jeanie 'for joys brides hope to have'. There is no simple division between good or bad sister or good or bad self and corresponding reward and punishment in *Goblin Market*. Laura is over-adventurous but Lizzie is too prim; Laura needs to learn circumspection and self-sufficiency, whilst Lizzie needs to brave and master the outer world. Laura's cure is, appropriately, effected in a dramatic way which complements the dramatic way in which she was seduced by, and consumed, the sweet fruit.

<sup>15</sup> On the connection between sexuality and hunger in Rossetti's poetry also see 'A Triad' where one woman 'was blue with famine after love' and 'one famished died for love' (I, p. 29).

<sup>16</sup> Jerome J. McGann, 'Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation,' VS, 23 (1980), p. 253.

I have not intended to suggest that Christina Rossetti imbibed absinthe, or indeed that any members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle drank it. As far as I am able to ascertain, D. G. Rossetti, the most dissolute of the generally abstemious Pre-Raphaelites, confined himself to whisky and chloral. In any case absinthe was always favoured by the French more than the English, from the Decadents through to the Impressionists. What I do suggest however, is that Christina Rossetti, who wrote much about the language of flowers and other plants, would have been cognisant with the properties and effects of wormwood.

Wormwood makes many appearances in the bible (the *King James* was favoured by Rossetti) the most influential text in Rossetti's life. In *Proverbs* Chapter 5 a reference to wormwood and harlots appears which relates to *Goblin Market* in a number of ways. Its treatment of the fallen woman motif, its sensual language and the description of the smoothness of the whore's throat, recalls Laura who continually stretches 'her gleaming neck' in her hunger for sensual/sexual experience. Here too there is a dichotomy between sweetness and bitterness and we learn that unbridled experience will lead a woman down the broad path to hell, a path which Laura with her sister's aid will turn back from just in time.<sup>17</sup>

3. For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil.

4. But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.

5. Her feet go down to death; her steps *take hold on hell*.<sup>18</sup> [my italics]

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<sup>17</sup> In 'Amor Mundi' we are told 'The downhill path is easy, but there's no turning back' (I, p. 213).

<sup>18</sup> The sonnet 'The World' (I, p. 76), which deals with the *contemptus mundi* theme echoes these lines. Rossetti's speaker, contemplating the ghastly possibility of selling one's soul for things of the world (as Laura so very nearly does) describes this world using the phrase: '*ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety*' [my italics]. She then bitterly states:

If this a friend indeed, that I should sell  
My soul to her, give her my life and youth,  
Till my feet, cloven too, *take hold on hell*.  
[My italics].

*'Maude-Clare' and her sisters*

'Why did a great lord find me out,  
And praise my flaxen hair?'

For a variety of reasons 'Maude-Clare' is one of the most interesting of Rossetti's 'sisterhood' poems. Rossetti wrote a number of poems about sisters, cousins, or groups of young women living in the same community. Aside from *Goblin Market*, these are a 'A Triad', 'Cousin Kate', 'Noble Sisters', 'An Apple-Gathering', 'Sister Maude', 'Songs in a Cornfield', 'Maiden Song', and 'The Lowest Room'.

Most of the poems listed above were composed around the late 1850s to early 1860s. For some years Rossetti worked as a lay sister at the Saint Mary Magdalen House of Charity at Highgate, a penitentiary run by Anglican nuns for 'fallen' women or prostitutes. Here the women were trained in reading, writing and the 'domestic arts'.<sup>19</sup> Critics have sometimes been disappointed by the fact that, due to its composition date (27 April 1859<sup>20</sup>) it was thought that *Goblin Market* could not be directly linked to Rossetti's experiences with the inmates of the House of Charity. D. M. R. Bentley, however, has pointed out that it is possible that Rossetti may have begun some kind of work at the penitentiary prior to 1860. Bentley also reminds us of the logistic impossibility of Rossetti having composed the whole of *Goblin Market* (a poem of nearly 600 lines) in one day. Bentley proposes that the composition date given could be seen as the date of the poem's inception, or the date 'on which it reached a sufficient state of completion to warrant careful transcription'.<sup>21</sup> This hypothesis is supported by the comment made by Rossetti herself: ' "*Goblin Market*". . . was written (*subject of course to subsequent revision*) as

<sup>19</sup> For more information on life in the penitentiary see Frances Thomas, *Christina Rossetti*, pp. 180-191.

<sup>20</sup> See Crump, I, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> See D. M. R. Bentley, 'The Meretricious and the Meritorious in *Goblin Market*: A Conjecture and an Analysis', in Kent, pp. 57-9.

long ago as April 27. 1859' [my italics]<sup>22</sup>. In an interesting twist which shows how new biographical information can be very helpful in the interpretation of particular poems, Jan Marsh, in her new biography of Christina Rossetti, asserts that Rossetti began work at Highgate Penitentiary in early 1859, before or at the same time as the composition of *Goblin Market*. Her evidence for this appears to derive from a letter dated 3 August 1859 written by Rossetti to her friend Amelia Barnard Heimann in which she tells Mrs Heimann that she had:

... hardly seen Mr Scott during his annual visit to London because she had been 'away almost the whole time at Highgate'. Mrs Heimann clearly knew what this meant.<sup>23</sup>

As Bentley and Marsh point out, if we take it that Rossetti was working at Highgate during the composition of *Goblin Market* the poem can be read as, in part, emanating from her experience of the prostitutes there and as an exemplary tale. Marsh claims

It therefore seems very probable that *Goblin Market* was conceived as an engaging but moral tale for the Penitentiary, designed to delight and instruct and pitched midway between the nursery and the study, in order to be accessible both to intelligent children and imaginative adults. And if not written explicitly for the girls at Highgate — there is no evidence that such storytelling formed any part of the Sisters' instruction — it surely evoked their situation, and the relation of fallen and redemptive 'sisters'.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the sisterhood poems deal with a broken betrothal motif. This motif appears frequently in Rossetti's work, but her use of it intensified during the years around 1860, the year in which she became

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<sup>22</sup> Crump, I, p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 222. Also see p. 218, p. 229 and a note on p. 586.

<sup>24</sup> Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 235. Revealing new information on the relationship between life in the penitentiary at Highgate and the composition of *Goblin Market* has very recently appeared in The Centennial of Christina Rossetti 1830-1894 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, 32 (1994), ed. Antony H. Harrison. See Jan Marsh, 'Christina Rossetti's Vocation: The Importance of *Goblin Market*', pp. 233-48.

officially involved in what can be broadly called social work. Rossetti's poetry abounds in 'mateless doves' who are betrayed by men and die or remain spinsters (either bitterly or proudly), at times cherishing illegitimate children. Sometimes, though rarely, sisters achieve love ('Maiden-Song'), or achieve children without men (*Goblin Market*), and sisters are often vicious to one another ('Noble Sisters' and 'Sister Maude') or compete with each other for men ('Cousin Kate' and 'Maude Clare'). Just as the titles of these poems are virtually interchangeable so too their subject matter overlaps.

One of the most salient characteristics of the sisterhood poems is their remarkably uncensorious attitude to 'fallen' women. In these poems Rossetti presents an awareness of women as victims of male vice. These poems are set in a female faery world in which men are often seducers and traitors who are only necessary for the procreation of children or the status and security they confer upon women by marriage. Rossetti's single women achieve a peculiar autonomy in their defeat at the hands of men. As Jerome McGann claimed:

The great value of Christina Rossetti's work— and in this she is like no other woman writer of the period— lies in its pitiless sense that the world is a scene of betrayal and that the betrayal appears most clearly, and most terribly, in the relations between man and woman.<sup>25</sup>

In 'Cousin Kate', 'Maude Clare', 'Sister Maude' and 'Noble Sisters' the narrative focuses upon the interrelationships of the women and their differing responses to the men who provoke the tensions between them. The men are either absent or virtually irrelevant. 'Sister Maude' and 'Noble Sisters', for instance, are bitter addresses from one sister to another in which the man is absent but is the source of the enmity between them. In both poems one sister maliciously deprives the other of her intended husband. In 'Sister Maude' the spiteful sister has somehow contributed to the young man's death, while in 'Noble Sisters' one sister drives away her sister's potential husband. In these two poems and others, women

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<sup>25</sup> Jerome J. McGann, 'Christina Rossetti's Poems', p. 241.

are prepared to destroy each other in the race for husbands. In all four ballads women snipe at each other. These 'sisterhood' poems are not, therefore, about sisterly love and solidarity in the modern sense of the term; rather they concern women who are cruel to each other in their forced competition for men. Sociological factors come into play as women without land or money who give up their virginity are exchanged for women of virtue and/or money. These poems deal with women as commodities.

'An Apple Gathering' is particularly telling. In this seemingly simple, rather morose ballad which has many points of connection with *Goblin Market*, one maiden plucks apple-blossoms to beautify her hair. Later that season no apples grow from the tree where she has plucked the blossoms. Fickle Willie consequently abandons the narrator-maiden for 'Plump Gertrude' and she is mocked by the other maidens, Lilian and Liliast. Like Jeanie who 'died for joys brides hope to have' our unnamed speaker is left outcast and chillingly alone:

I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos  
And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,  
And hastened: but I loitered, while the dew  
Fell fast I loitered still.  
(I, p. 44)

The sisterhood ballads speak much of 'shame'. In the ironically titled 'Noble Sisters' one aristocratic but bitchy sister sends her sister's lover away, telling her that she will curse her if she 'shames' the family by pursuing him. 'Sister Maude' opens: 'Who told my mother of my shame, / Who told my father of my dear?' (I, p. 59). This shame is the shame of Laura and Jeanie, the speaker of 'An Apple-Gathering', and of D. G. Rossetti's Rose Mary and Aloÿse ('The Bride's Prelude')— that of sexual experience.

In 'Cousin Kate' (a poem suppressed in later editions of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*) the cause of shame is made explicit. An innocent country maiden has traded her virginity to a lord in exchange for what she thought was love, but she has been duped. She mawkishly confesses:



He wore me like a silken knot,  
 He changed me like a glove;  
 So now I moan, an unclean thing,  
 Who might have been a dove.  
 (I, p. 32)

This age-old theme, best expressed in the popular ballad refrain 'O how could you use a poor maiden so?' is here addressed to the cousin who has usurped the speaker in her lord's affections rather than to the lord himself. The addressee of the poem, cousin Kate, although as lowly born as her cousin, is canny enough to hold on to her virginity in order to secure a marriage; but the speaker has the proverbial last laugh, since she has borne a male heir and her cousin's marriage appears to be barren. The speaker believes Cousin Kate should have shown cousinly solidarity:

O cousin Kate, my love was true,  
 Your love was writ in sand:  
 If he had fooled not me but you,  
 If you stood where I stand,  
 He'd not have won me with his love  
 Nor bought me with his land;  
 I would have spit into his face  
 And not taken his hand.

The tables are turned, the virtuous woman is shown not to be virtuous at all, but the tables turn even further in 'Maude Clare'. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this poem is that it exists in a number of different versions. A poem of fifteen stanzas named 'Maude Clare' was first published on 5th November, 1859 in *Once a Week*. Then in 1862 a twelve stanza poem of the same title appeared in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. The third version of the poem is a manuscript version of forty-one stanzas which Crump reprints in I, pp. 244-7.

Rossetti's editorial practice often consisted of omitting stanzas from the beginning or ending of drafts of poems in order to achieve conciseness. The 1862 version opens abruptly:

Out of the church she followed them  
 With a lofty step and mien:  
 His bride was like a village maid,  
 Maude Clare was like a queen.  
 (I, pp. 44-5)

This opening has the immediacy of the opening of William Morris's 'The Defence of Guenevere': 'But knowing now that they would have her speak . . .' which was achieved by Morris or the printer losing the initial pages of the manuscript. The revised version of 'Maude Clare' gives the impression that quite a few stanzas of the poem have been shorn away from the beginning of the poem, but this is not the case. The 1862 version leaves out a wealth of material contained in the manuscript version such as a description of the couple's progress to the church (followed by Maude Clare) and the wedding itself. The original 'Maude Clare' opens with a survey of the rural landscape gradually narrowing the focus until we come to the beautiful, queenly Maude Clare. The exchange between Maude Clare, the groom, and the bride occurs at the end of the poem. The revised 'Maude Clare' opens with an exchange, but as I have stated, no part of the revised version echoes the manuscript version.

The 1862 'Maude Clare' plays strange games with the reader. The reader familiar with 'An Apple-Gathering' (which is a few pages earlier in the text), 'Noble Sisters', 'Sister Maude' and 'Cousin Kate' has become accustomed to taking the part of one sister or cousin against the other but will find that Maude Clare and her counterpart, Lady Nell, are not so easily judged. Maude Clare is proud and beautiful, a queen to Nell's 'village maid', but she is also cruel and sour. Lord Thomas is too guilty and afraid to reply to Maude Clare's scorn so it is up to the mouse, Lady Nell, to roar:

"Yea, tho' you're taller by the head,  
More wise, and much more fair;  
I'll love him till he loves me best,  
Me best of all, Maude Clare".  
(I, p. 46)

Maude Clare is the glamorous, wronged woman, but her vindictive speech seems an ill-timed act of pointless shrewishness. Antony H. Harrison regarded Maude Clare's motives in spoiling the wedding thus:

If her indifference is genuine, we condemn Maude Clare for unjustly disrupting the occasion and for vainly upstaging the married couple. If it is a mask, then she is still doing little

service by her tantrum to herself or to the man she would be  
thought still to love.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps Harrison underestimates the jilted woman's liking for revenge. Maude Clare's motives are not given in this dramatic, but distanced, version of the poem. Therefore she emerges at the end of the ballad looking embittered and somewhat foolish, yet in the original version of the poem Maude Clare was much more sinned against than sinning. In the 1862 version Lord Thomas's defection is not explained. We wonder why (in the context of ballad virtues) he would marry the shorter, uglier, stupider maiden. In the manuscript version of the poem this anomaly is explained— we are told that Lord Thomas married Lady Nell for money and land: 'For Maude Clare for all she was so fair / Had never an inch of land'. Maude Clare pointedly informs Lady Nell:

"For you have purchased him with gold;—  
Her words cut sharp and slow:  
"For its your gold he took you for;—"   
She said and turned to go.  
(I, p. 246)

Maude Clare's suffering is made explicit in the manuscript version, as is her celestial beauty:

She faced the bridegroom and the bride—  
But oh her heart must ache—  
With steady eyes and steady voice  
And hand that would not shake . . . .  
  
No memory shook her ringing voice  
Or dimmed her taunting eye . . .

The lack of sisterly solidarity between maidens is the crux of this poem rather than the betrayal of the male. In the 1862 version Nell has the last words, and her dignity is maintained. Maude Clare is the heroine, the poem is named after her, but are we supposed to admire Nell in the end, forgetting Lord Thomas or indeed Maude Clare? The ending of the

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<sup>26</sup> Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 5.

manuscript version of the poem is curious. Harrison claims that in this version Nell

. . . displays only callousness in her defensive, legalistic reply to Maude Clare, rather than the tenacity and boldness that make her the more attractive of Tom's lovers in the 1862 version.<sup>27</sup>

But Harrison is mistaken. Here is what Nell says:

"I never guessed you loved my Lord,  
I never heard your wrong;  
You should have spoken before the priest  
Had made our tie so strong;  
  
You should have stood up in the Church  
To claim your rights before;  
You should have parted us in the Church  
Or kept silence evermore."  
(I, p. 247)

Nell refers to the old injunction 'If there be any person here who knows of any impediment . . .' that much-used moment in novels and films where old sins and previous attachments are shockingly revealed. Nell means that she *would* have given up her claim on Lord Thomas if she had known that he had promised himself to another; her honour as a woman, a sister, would not have allowed her to take what belonged to another. Nell is justly peeved. It is, after all her wedding day, but her comments are not simply petulant.

'Maude Clare' appears to be related to an early ballad by Tennyson called 'Lady Clare' (first published in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, 1830). Both Rossetti's Maude Clare and Tennyson's Lady Clare are connected with lilies. Tennyson's poem opens:

It was the time when lilies blow,  
And clouds are highest up in air,  
Lord Ronald brought a lily-white doe  
To give his cousin, Lady Clare.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Poems of Tennyson 1830-1870*, with an introduction by Sir Thomas Herbert Warren (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 235.

The long manuscript version of Rossetti's 'Maude Clare' opens:

The fields were white with lily buds,  
White gleamed the lilyed beck,  
Each mated pigeon plumed the pomp  
Of his metallic neck  
(I, p. 245)

'Lady Clare', like 'Maude Clare' concerns a betrothal and a wedding. In 'Lady Clare' Lady Clare is about to be married to her betrothed, her cousin Ronald, when her nurse abruptly confesses that she is not in fact 'Lady Clare' but is the nurse's own child who was secretly swapped in the place of the rightful Lady Clare who died as a baby. The nurse insists that since she is no longer Lady Clare she no longer has any right to her title or lands. Early in the poem the incumbent Lady Clare had professed her thankfulness that Lord Ronald was about to marry her for herself and not her wealth:

"He does not love me for my birth,  
Nor for my lands so broad and fair;  
He loves me for my own true worth,  
And that is well", said Lady Clare.  
(p. 235)

Maude Clare, in the manuscript version of the poem, is thrown over because 'for all she was so fair' she 'Had never an inch of land', and she viciously snipes at Lady Nell: 'For you have purchased him with gold . . . For its your gold he took you for'. Tennyson's Lady Clare is afraid that it was, after all, her gold and land that attracted Lord Ronald. So on learning of her true identity, she dresses as a peasant and confronts Lord Ronald with the story of her heritage. Unlike Rossetti's maiden poems, this one has a happy ending:

"If you are not the heiress born,  
And I," said he, "the lawful heir,  
We two will wed to-morrow morn,  
And you shall still be Lady Clare".  
(p. 237)

Lady Clare's insistence on breaking her promise to marry Lord Ronald because of the new circumstances in which she finds herself after the nurse's confession is interesting in light of the argument I have put forward regarding Nell's comments to Maude Clare about Lord Thomas's breach of promise. On the day of her wedding Lady Clare tells the truth to Lord Ronald before they are married, just as Nell wished Maude Clare had told her the truth. Lady Clare would not marry under false pretences as Nell was forced to do. 'Lady Clare' and 'Maude Clare', it could be argued, share several features since they both draw on stock themes and images of medieval ballads, but I think they are more closely allied than accidental echoing would allow and Rossetti was certainly familiar with Tennyson's work.

'Maiden-Song' is a song celebrating the power of maidens to win marriage partners. Although a little cynical it is still one of the nearest things Rossetti wrote to a light-hearted romp. In order to win lovers and husbands, women must be actively engaged in the world in whatever way is open to them as women. In 'Maiden-Song' which is set in a hazy, magical place somewhere in the forgotten past: 'Long ago and long ago, / And long ago still', three sisters (tall Meggan, dainty May and fair Margaret) woo husbands from afar with their amazingly seductive singing powers. These three fair rustic sirens literally charm the birds from the air and the fish from their sea with their beguiling voices. Margaret is far more beautiful than the other two sisters and her powers are therefore much greater. One day Meggan and May leave Margaret at home to sing and sew while they go out 'Up the hill and down the hill' like Laura and Lizzie, in search of strawberry leaves (which are most probably beautifying agents for the inferior sisters). The two women sit in the grass and sing merrily. Soon a herdsman is inexorably drawn to Meggan, smitten with love for her through the beauty of her song. Meggan decides that she had better marry him rather than stay with Margaret who outshines her in beauty, for she would always be second. Similarly, May's song draws a shepherd who longs to marry her and she accepts him for the same reason. Meanwhile, lovely Margaret wonders why her sisters are so late in returning and to pass the time she sings.

Margaret's song attracts the king of all that country, who throws himself down at her feet and is followed by all the living creatures— bird, beast, fish, and human for miles around.

Although in part a delicious fairytale, the moral of 'Maiden-Song' is amusingly, but harshly pragmatic. Witness Meggan's response to a proposal of marriage:

"Better be first with him,  
Than dwell where fairer Margaret sits,  
Who shines my brightness dim,  
For every second where she sits,  
However fair I be:  
I will be lady of his love,  
And he shall worship me . . ."  
(I, p. 113)

A little later, maiden May goes through a similar process of reasoning:

In her fluttered heart young May  
Mused a dubious while:  
"If he loves me as he says"—  
Her lips curved with a smile:  
"Where Margaret shines like the sun  
I shine but like a moon;  
If sister Meggan makes her choice  
I can make mine as soon . . ."  
(I, p. 114)

At least young May has the courtesy to 'flutter' a little at the young man's proposal; Meggan does not even do that. It seems both sisters marry merely to get away from their sister who literally 'outshines' them in beauty— they do not marry for 'romantic' reasons at all. Although the men profess love in winning, if clumsy, terms the women marry to have a position in the world rather than to be loved.

Rossetti's maiden-sisterhood poems continually press upon the reader the fact that marriage is a social contract with inherent advantages and disadvantages for women. In lieu of obtaining a husband maidens smile serenely, embroider and gather flowers living in hope. In 'the Lowest Room' (a contemporary rather than faery land treatment of 'maidens' and life-choices) two sisters epitomise the active or male approach to life and the passive or female approach. The prettier, more

'feminine' and content woman will always be 'first'. She listens to her elder sister's anguished yearnings for the heady Homeric days of blood and battles and eventually gently persuades her that she must be humble, accept her lot, and await heaven. Yet the repression of unsatisfied desires for excitement and involvement in the world is not easily accomplished, for, as Rossetti wrote in another poem:

Its a weary life, it is, she said:—  
Doubly blank in a woman's Lot:  
I wish and I wish I were a man;  
Or, better than any being, were not . . .  
(*'From the Antique'*, III, p. 231)

For the woman who longs for love and marriage and remains unsatisfied, stasis or death is the only reprieve from pain. *'Songs in a Cornfield'*, written only a year after *'Maiden-Song'*, is in many ways its antithesis. The similarities between the poems are immediately obvious, both, for instance, feature a trio of pretty women (as does *'A Triad'*) who sing of love in the rural outdoors. In *'Songs in a Cornfield'* Lettice, Rachel and May sing while they reap corn but there is another 'sister': *'Only Marian cannot sing / While her sweetheart's away'*. A mystery surrounds this lover. Perhaps he was false to Marian? As the other women sing:

"Take the wheat in your arm  
Whilst day is broad above,  
Take the wheat to your bosom,  
But not a false false love."  
(I, p. 127)

The poem is charged with noon-day heat and fettered eroticism. The second song, by Rachel, dwells on this constraint. Rachel wishes that they could escape and fly away like the swallow:

"After the swallow  
All sweet things follow:  
All things go their way  
Only we must stay,  
Must not follow; good bye swallow, good swallow".  
(I, p. 128)



'Listless Marian' contributes her song which turns out to be a macabre dirge which reads, in part:

"Is it dark or light below?  
Oh but is it cold like snow?  
Dost thou feel the green things grow  
Fast or slow?

"Is it warm or cold beneath,  
Oh but is it cold like death?  
Cold like death, without a breath  
Cold like death?"  
(I, p. 129)

Marian appears to be addressing herself to the absent lover whom she believes to be dead. Harrison countenances the possibility that this elegiac song could be for herself or for her lover,<sup>29</sup> but I think it unlikely that she envisages her own death as her preoccupation has been with the absent lover. Perhaps she finds the notion that he is dead, and therefore will not return to her, preferable to the notion that his is a 'false, false love'. According to the narrative voice which concludes the poem, Marian too will soon be dead:

If he comes today  
He will find her weeping;  
If he comes tomorrow  
He will find her sleeping;  
If he comes the next day  
He'll not find her at all,  
He may tear his curling hair,  
Beat his breast and call.

In the manuscript version of the poem we are supplied with an extra final two stanzas describing Marian in death:

But death will keep her secret,  
Turf will veil her face,  
She will lie at rest at rest  
In her resting place.

No more reaping

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<sup>29</sup> Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 44.

Wheat thro' the harvest day.

No more weeping  
False lover gone away:  
It may be sleeping  
As dove sleeps in her nest;  
It may be keeping  
Watch yet at rest.  
(I, p. 225)

The last line quoted suggests, as many of Rossetti's grave poems do, that the dead are not quiet: Marian still waits for her false lover in her bed beneath the ground.

The following lines from 'Songs in a Cornfield' could equally well have come from *The Prince's Progress*:

Today or tomorrow  
He surely will come.  
Let him haste to joy  
Lest he lag for sorrow . . .

Why do women have to wait for men who never arrive? This is a question investigated by Rossetti in *The Prince's Progress*, a poem which has an unusual history. As we are told by William Michael Rossetti:

The original nucleus of this poem is the dirge song at its close—'Too late for love, too late for joy' etc. This was written in 1861, and entitled *The Prince who arrived too late*. When Christina Rossetti was looking up, in 1865, the material for a fresh poetical volume, it was, I believe, my brother who suggested to her to turn the dirge into a narrative poem of some length. She adopted the suggestion—almost the only instance in which she wrote anything so as to meet directly the views of another person.<sup>30</sup>

This note suggests various things: for example it implies that the poem may have been written as 'makeweight' for the new volume, especially in view of the fact that it became the title poem of *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* of 1866, a parallel volume to *Goblin Market and Other Poems* of 1862. It also indicates that the poem would not have existed in its present form if not for D. G. Rossetti's suggestion that the dirge-song be expanded.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Notes', *Poetical Works*, p. 461.

Although he often advised her, Rossetti did not obey D. G. Rossetti's editorial advice on every occasion and when she did comply with his suggestions it was usually a matter of cutting material out rather than making additions. As William states, it is the only occasion he knew when she 'wrote to order'.

It is peculiar that D. G. Rossetti wished to see the dirge expanded as it contains material which could easily be perceived as pertaining to his own life. Part of the dirge song reads:

"Ten years ago, five years ago,  
One year ago,  
Even then you had arrived in time,  
Tho' somewhat slow;

Then you had known her living face  
Which now you cannot know . . . "  
(ll. 491-496)

D. G. Rossetti met Elizabeth Siddall perhaps as early as 1850. They finally married on 13 April 1860, and she was dead by a most probably suicidal overdose of chloral on 11th February 1862.<sup>31</sup> At the time Rossetti wrote the dirge, Lizzie, as she was always known, was still living but had become increasingly unwell over a number of years. Indeed D. G. Rossetti may have only agreed to marry her because he thought that she was on the point of dying. By 1865 when D. G. Rossetti suggested that Christina Rossetti incorporate the dirge in a long poem, Elizabeth Siddall Rossetti had been dead for a few years, but was not as yet exhumed. *The Prince's Progress*, in its story of a weak, dilatory prince whose bride dies whilst awaiting him could thus constitute quite a family embarrassment, particularly to the preternaturally sensitive D. G. Rossetti whose life would soon be laid waste by guilt, paranoia, insomnia and chloral.

*The Prince's Progress* could be read as Rossetti's critique of her brother as a tardy suitor. She had already commented on the relationship of her D. G. Rossetti and Siddall in 'In An Artist's Studio', a poem she wrote in 1856 but left unpublished in her lifetime. The poem reads:

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<sup>31</sup> The most authoritative recent account of the mythology and life of Elizabeth Siddall is Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (London: Quartet, 1989).

One face looks out from all his canvasses,  
 One self-same figure sits or walks or leans;  
 We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
 That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
 A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,  
 A saint, an angel;— every canvas means  
 The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
 He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
 And she with two kind eyes looks back at him  
 Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
 Not wan with waiting, nor with sorrow dim;  
 Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
 Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.  
 (III, p. 264)

The poem is replete with implied criticisms of D. G. Rossetti's vampirism or cannibalism of Siddall's face and form, and his selfish inability to see how she had become worn out by waiting for marriage.

*The Prince's Progress* deserves comparison with both quest poems such as Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' and (as indicated in the title) *The Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as fairytales like 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'The Briar Rose'. Despite these resemblances, however, *The Prince's Progress* is notable for its singularity.

The first thing most readers will notice about *The Prince's Progress* is that it draws on the sleeping-beauty fable. The Princess sleeps and weeps, awaiting the Prince. Her maids soothe her, and speak to her, but is it their voices which are the 'true voice of my doom' that the Prince hears? The Prince, a world away from the Princess, is somehow contracted to journey to the Princess in order to marry her. The Prince, who realises that he must soon leave, is meanwhile 'taking his ease on cushion and mat'. This is the first of many sarcastic references to the Prince. The Prince seems fascinated and flattered by the idea of the beautiful Princess forlornly awaiting him. The Princess is 'Spell-bound she watches in one white room, / And is patient for thy sake'. It is never explained to us why the Princess should be spell-bound. Just as men can never arrive on time, so women cannot survive without the expected lover. In her portrait of the Princess Rossetti supplies us with a fantastical rendering of the social situation of the powerless Victorian middle class virgin confined to the private world of the home, who was expected to idly wait

for the lover who would bring her to life— a lover who might never arrive. The life of the Prince, the Victorian male, on the other hand is an active journey beset with many distractions, delays and seductions of various kinds. In the portrait of the Prince Rossetti presents a superb parody of the conventional Romantic hero. The Prince is strong of limb and handsome (as all Princes must be) but in an ironic twist which subverts the rules of the genre, Rossetti's Prince is lazy, arrogant, vain, easily distracted, and lacks resolve. In fairy-tales Princes are almost always brave and fearless, enduring terrible physical hardships, travelling many miles, fighting battles with monsters and sorcerers, all to attain their goal — invariably the Princess who awaits them. In *The Prince's Progress* the Princess appears to conform to the pattern of the traditional Sleeping Beauty, beguiling the time in utter idleness until her Prince awakes her with a kiss. Yet there is something strange and unhealthy about the Princess's attitude. She awaits her suitor with very little hope and no animation or vitality of any kind:

There was no hurry in her hands,  
No hurry in her feet;  
There was no bliss drew night to her,  
That she might run to greet!  
(I, pp. 109-10)

The miserable Princess languishes feebly, anticipating disappointment. The Prince is hardly more active or hopeful than she. He dawdles, procrastinates, complains constantly, and is taken in by every sorcerer he encounters. It seems that Rossetti intended that the Prince should accept the burden of guilt for the unhappiness brought to himself and the death of the Princess. It is true that the Princess did very little to secure her happiness, but she successfully fulfilled her passive female role while the Prince failed to fulfill his active male role.

Overall the poem has an ambivalent tone. The passages concerning the Prince's progress are weirdly picturesque. We are frustrated by the Prince and laugh at his ineptitude whilst the inevitable death of the Princess is presented in a quite different key; it is a real tragedy of the wasting, wasted life of a maiden who could triumph only in death.

## II: Knights and Ladies

William Morris

### (i) *Knights*

'After these years the flowers forget their blood'.

Christina Rossetti's Maidens may have been angry, but William Morris's Knights and Ladies are mad. In *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) Morris examines the madness which is brought about by sexual repression, suppression and sublimation. The dream/fantasy poems with which I will deal in this section have often been regarded as fragmentary, even bad poems; but they are not bad poems, they merely have mad protagonists. In a recent article on D. G. Rossetti's 'The Bride's Prelude' (to be discussed in the next section of this chapter) Ernest Fontana makes this point about Morris's dream poems:

... in less readerly poems from this volume [*The Defence of Guenevere*] such as "The Blue Closet," "The Tune of the Seven Towers" ... and "The Wind," the diseased or enchanted conditions of the protagonists/protagonist are projected, as in *The Bride's Prelude*, onto the text itself. Rather than judge such truncated, incomplete and paratactic texts as "repulsive" failures, we might usefully expand our sense of Victorian poetic genres to include ... the category of the true fragment.  
[My interpolation]<sup>32</sup>

Morris's dream poems deal with psyches in distress; psyches so distressed that their narration distorts the very fabric of the text. The protagonists seem mad because they use a dream-logic to tell their story, a kind of causal progression rather than a 'normal' linear narrative. The reason they do this is because they speak of love and, as in all Pre-Raphaelite love poetry, love is hard to talk about. Morris's men and women find communication difficult, if not impossible at times, and the form of

<sup>32</sup> Ernest Fontana, 'Fragment and Disease: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Bride's Prelude*', *JPRS*, 2 (1993), p. 9.

communication at which they fail most spectacularly is sex. There are many obstacles for men and women to overcome in Morris's poetry before they can be united, and these usually prove fatal to the relationship. For example, the most severe difficulties— the absence or death of one partner— usually marks the end of the relationship.

In Morris's dream poems the metaphorical obstacles between men and women are made literal. They are embodied in the difficulties of quests within the shifting boundaries of surreal landscapes. There is no rational causal progression; therefore there are gaps. There are spaces, silences and gaps which convey to the reader the mystery and difficulties of love. In Morris's poetry sexual love is a profoundly beautiful and desirable thing, but it is also puzzling and enigmatic; thus only poetic forms such as the riddle, the unresolved quest or fragment can convey to the reader the disjunction of the love stories which Morris presents. In these poems the reader frequently has the sense that they are trying to put together a puzzle which has pieces missing. These poems are the remnants of erotic histories in which the reader tries to capture the pasts of the characters through the scattered traces of their lives.

*The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* contains many poems which have a verve and vitality often observed to be lacking in Morris's later work, particularly *The Earthly Paradise*. As Cecil Y. Lang claimed, these are very original poems:

. . . Morris' specific achievement was to cross Pre-Raphaelitism (or Rossetti-ism) plus "Browning-ism" with his own poetic being in such a way as to produce poems like no other in the language before or since, even in his own works.<sup>33</sup>

Over one hundred and thirty years after their publication, these poems still have the power to shock, intrigue and bewilder. 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire', 'The Gilliflower of Gold', and 'The Wind' are especially resonant and powerful poems which deal with love and loss vividly pictured through images of sexuality and violent death.

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<sup>33</sup> Cecil Y. Lang, *The Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle*, p. 509.

In 1975 Dianne F. Sadoff published a persuasive article entitled 'Erotic Murders: Structural and Rhetorical Irony in William Morris' Froissart Poems' (from which I have adapted the title of this chapter) which discusses, amongst other things, how the characters in these poems 'often confuse the need for sexual release with the experience of death'.<sup>34</sup> The connection between sexuality and death in *The Defence of Guenevere* volume is also a concern of this present chapter, but rather than making a comparative study of the Froissart poems I will instead observe linked themes in the Froissart and fantasy poems in terms of the relationships depicted between men and women, or 'knights' and 'ladies'.

'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire', 'The Gilliflower of Gold', and 'The Wind' all concern the relationship between a knight and a dead woman. These poems all examine gender relations and male sexual frustration. In many ways the 'Knight' poems represent the other side of the experience articulated by Christina Rossetti in her 'Maiden' poems. In the 'Maiden' poems men betray women by abandonment or absence, in Morris's 'Knight' poems women react to men's desire by absenting themselves in the most permanent way possible: they die.

'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' does not concern Geffray Teste Noire' at all. Rather it is a Browningsque dramatic monologue which concerns its narrator— a soldier-knight named John of Castel Neuf (or John of Newcastle, his nationality is deliberately left ambiguous)— who urges his listener, Alleyne, to communicate his story to Froissart so that it can be included in his *Chronicles*. The siege of Ventadour, an attempt to capture Teste Noire in which the narrator takes part, is thoroughly documented by Froissart, as are the main events of the *Jacquerie* (the peasant uprising of 1358) which appears in the poem as an horrific memory of the narrator's childhood. These real historical events frame Morris's imaginary story of the soldier's discovery of a pair of skeletons in Verville forest. The narrative continually shifts time, place, and tone. What begins as a boy's own adventure account of a siege ends as a grim, nostalgic *memento mori*. The quest motif is disrupted, displaced. The

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<sup>34</sup> See Dianne F. Sadoff, 'Erotic Murders: Structural and Rhetorical Irony in Morris' Froissart Poems', *VP*, 13 (1975), p. 12.



object of the quest is to seize the archetypal villain, but in the end this becomes incidental to both John and the reader. What is important is that John of Newcastle who, as we learn at the end of the poem, is now old, comes to terms with the life that he has lived as a soldier, a life of killing people. He does this through eroticising the body of a dead woman.

Whilst waiting to ambush *Teste Noire*, John finds the bones of a man and a woman and imagines how they came to be there. Using the evidence of the physical remains he gradually pieces together the past of the knight and lady. Fleeing from an ambush, the knight had covered the lady with his war cloak; he was mortally wounded, her wrist was broken and her throat pierced by an arrow. Both die. John's subsequent treatment of this unknown past provides a commentary on the nature of time, history and love. As the passing of time has robbed the couples of their flesh and blood and their pasts John reinvests them with a past by reconstructing their deaths, giving meaning to their relationship, and reassessing his own feelings about the corpse of the woman. John pleads with his listener to tell Froissart (referred to as the 'Canon of Chimay') 'All that I tell you, for all this is true'. But we cannot know if all this is true, and neither can John. Froissart's history leaves out the fate of these two lovers while the more prosaic history of the villainous *Teste Noire* is chronicled for posterity.

John's reconstruction of the deaths of the knight and lady may have some basis in fact: what he has observed from the condition of their corpses may bear out his story, but his narrative becomes progressively more fantastical as his necrophiliac obsession grows. His reconstruction of the lovers' deaths begins as a romantic, heroic story, as if he has subconsciously taken over the role of the dead knight as protector of the dead lady; but in being dead the lady has thwarted his desire for her. Frustrated, he envisions her as a ghastly Swinburnian *femme fatale*. This vision is partly brought about by his long submerged memories of the bodies of women burning during the *Jacquerie* where, at the age of fifteen, he witnessed his father's own madness at the sight of the women's corpses. As he says in his reverie, associating this corpse with the others:

. . . never before that day  
However much a soldier I might be,  
Could I look on a skeleton and say  
I care not for it, shudder not— now see,  
  
Over those bones I sat and pored for hours,  
And thought, and dream'd, and still I scarce could see  
The small white bones that lay upon the flowers,  
But evermore I saw the lady . . .  
(I, p. 79)

John comes to care for this corpse too much. She resembles Swinburne's Dolores:

O most pale face, that brings such joy and sorrow  
Into men's hearts yea, too, so piercing sharp  
That joy is, that it marcheth nigh to sorrow  
For ever— like an overwinded harp . . . —

As his anger grows his image of the woman distorts into a sadomasochistic as well as necrophiliac fantasy. He kisses the corpse whilst he is in the midst of experiencing a false memory of having been her lover:

*I kiss their soft lids there,  
And in green gardens scarce can stop my lips  
From wandering on your face, but that your hair  
Falls down and tangles me, back my face slips.*  
(I, p. 80)

Encapsulated here are many of the dominant motifs of male sexual desire in Pre-Raphaelite love poetry: lovers meeting in an Edenic bower, the closeness of the male to the release of desire which is hampered by the woman's tent of hair, which at times is alluring and protective but is here terrifying and primeval. John's need to blame the woman for his inability to 'possess' more than her bones makes him turn her into a siren whom he imagines drinks red wine as if it were blood:

. . . I saw you drink red wine  
Once at a feast; how slowly it sank in,  
As though you fear'd that some wild fate might twine  
Within that cup, and slay you for a sin.  
(I, p. 80)

And kisses like a carnivorous sword:

I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword  
That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,  
Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford  
For caught up breathings; like a dying sigh . . .

John has confused his own lust for the dead woman with his experience of violence in war. In an act of recompense and atonement he removes the woman and man's body from the scene of that violence and memorialises them. At the end of the poem we are told that John had a monument built for the skeletons which perpetuates their relationship just as he hopes his anecdotal history will:

In my new castle, down beside the Eure,  
There is a little chapel of squared stone,  
Painted inside and out; in green nook pure  
There did I lay them, every wearied bone;

And over it they lay, with stone-white hands  
Clasped fast together, hair made bright with gold;  
This Jacques Picard, known through many lands,  
Wrought cunningly; he's dead now— I am old.  
(I, p. 81).

The late J. M. S. Tompkins fleetingly mentions 'The Gilliflower of Gold' alongside 'Sir Giles War-Song' and 'Two Red Roses Across the Moon' as examples of 'brilliant chivalric successes'.<sup>35</sup> This comment seems to reduce 'The Gilliflower of Gold' to a straightforward account of a splendid tourney whereas the poem is a richer, more ambiguous work than Tompkins' brief comment suggests. The poem ostensibly gives an account of a medieval tourney seen through the mind of a victorious combatant, but the central interest of the poem lies in the knight's mental image of a woman with her head bowed over a bed of gilliflowers (summer or 'July-flowers') an image evoked by a refrain which is both a

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<sup>35</sup> J. M. S. Tompkins, *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry*, p. 23.

For a markedly different approach see my article 'Identifying William Morris' "The Gilliflower of Gold" ', *VP*, 29, (1991), pp. 241-46 (reproduced as Appendix C of this thesis) from which I draw in the following discussion.

shouted battle-cry and a recurring taunt inside the head of the knight which urges him onward to defeat his opponents.

The narrator-knight does battle with a strangely desperate fervour which cannot be explained simply as a wish to do honour to a living lady. The knight behaves like a grieving automaton, fighting savagely as if spurred by the painful memory of his lady's recent death. The lady in question is first addressed in the third stanza:

Although my spears in splinters flew,  
From John's steel coat, my eye was true;  
I wheel'd about, and cried for you:  
*Hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée.*

Until I thought of your dear head . . .  
(I, p. 90)

The knight utters his battle cry for his lady. Thus we may assume he fights *for* her, or for the flower as a symbol of her. In the fifth stanza he declares himself ready to attack one of his adversaries with an axe 'for my love's sake'. His battle cry sustains him, urging him on as his strength and courage fail. Although he fights fiercely, the knight recounts his endeavours in a distanced, ironical tone which echoes his robotic capacity for defeating his opposition. The poem is full of noise. Spears crack and rend themselves, axes crash down on armour, but the knight appears insulated, sealed inside his helmet with the constant refrain '*hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée*'. He admits some interest in gaining fame: '*Honneur aux fils des preux!*' This phrase, meaning something like 'Honour to the sons of the valiant knight' may be shouted by the crowd present at the battle, or it may be a remembered cry of the dead lady. The second possibility seems likely given the reference to the gilliflower blossoming 'new', meaning that if he were to hear that phrase again the knight would know that the lady who had once uttered it was living still. The knight is 'fain' or 'desperate' to hear the cry 'Honneur . . .' but he desires to hear these words because he wishes to hear his lady's voice 'Right in my ears again' rather than wishing to earn the praise of the onlookers.

It is the memory of his dead love, her bloodied blonde head staining the golden flowers in the gilliflower bed, which taunts him. His combat, symbolising his faithfulness to his dead love, serves to exorcise the dead

woman's image. Although the knight fights each opponent in turn with apparent gusto, his ferocity masks weariness and fear which are psychological in origin:

And my brain, dizzyed and afraid,  
Within my helm a fierce tune play'd,—  
    *Hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée.*  
(I, p. 91)

His impetus to victory is the verbal reminder and mental vision of his dead lady which jointly goad him. At the end of the poem the knight is exhausted both mentally and physically. It seems that his prize is a Queen and a kingship, but he does not care for this. The fighting over, the mask hiding his grief has dropped. His grief purged he is now tame and quiet, both physically and psychologically 'unarm'd':

And as with mazed and unarm'd face,  
Toward my own crown and the Queen's place,  
They led me at a gentle pace —  
    *Hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée.*

His last reward is another, now dimming, perhaps final, vision of his dead love:

I almost saw your quiet head  
Bow'd over the gilliflower bed,  
The yellow flowers stain'd with red —  
    *Hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée.*

How has she died? And what is a 'gilliflower'? I propose that the humble wallflower (*chieranthus cheirii*) is Morris's gilliflower of gold. There are three main reasons for my identification: (1) it was known as the 'gillyflower' and it was a very common medieval flower, (2) it was yellow (*jaune*) and (3) it has attached to it a symbolic importance that helps explain much of the mystery of Morris's poem.

*Chieranthus cheirii*, sometimes known as the 'wall-gillyflower', commonly grows on castle walls and battlements. Botanical histories

indicate that the medieval wallflower was plain yellow,<sup>36</sup> as does the *Oxford English Dictionary*, except for a reference made in the eighteenth century which describes 'the yellow wall-flower stain'd with iron brown'. Perhaps this accounts for 'the yellow flowers stained with red': the flowers are both yellow *and* red. This is a possibility that cannot be ruled out, but I still think Morris meant that the golden flowers were *stain'd* with red blood.

Morris's fierce warrior wears a gilliflower in his helmet. The wallflower has long been an emblem of love and chivalry:

It became the symbol of faithfulness in adversity, and in courtly circles was commonly worn in the caps of those who had been disappointed or crossed in love but were courteous enough to remain faithful; hence its still further nicknames: bleeding heart and *bloody warrior*.<sup>37</sup>  
[my italics]

The wallflower has also been specifically associated with the death of a woman. According to a version in a poem by Robert Herrick, an eloping lady fell to her death and metamorphosed into the flower.<sup>38</sup> This story springs from an old legend which exists in both an English and Scottish form. A lady is imprisoned by her father in a tower. Disguised as a wandering minstrel, her lover sings to her outside the window. She throws a sprig of wallflower to him, indicating that she accepts his proposal that they elope. In her attempt to descend the castle-wall the rope breaks and she falls to her death. Her bereft lover wanders Europe, forever wearing a wallflower in his cap: 'From that time on, the wallflower became the symbol of faithful and undying love in Britain.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), p. 152 and Lesley Gordon, *A Poorman's Nosegay: Flowers from a Cottage Garden* (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1973), p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens*, p. 152.

<sup>38</sup> *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), Volume I, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> McLean, p. 153.

The Scottish legend thus supplies us with the possible means of the lady's death. This is the knight's only memory of her:

I thought of your dear head,  
Bow'd to the gilliflower bed  
The yellow flowers stain'd with red.

Having fallen from a high window, the lady lies dead and bleeding in the gilliflower bed beneath. This seems a likely explanation except that the lady's head is described as 'bow'd', a position which seems to indicate that she is injured rather than dead. However, if we take it that a fall has caused the lady's death the distress experienced by the narrator, which has many of the characteristics of guilt, is logically explained: he has wooed his love to her death by asking her to flee with him.

Another explanation may be found at the very end of the poem where the knight is quietly led 'Toward my own crown and the Queen's place'. Perhaps he has become King by contracting a dynastic marriage, and his love has committed suicide in grief at his betrayal? A final possibility is that the lady of 'The Gilliflower of Gold' has been murdered. This would certainly explain the tremendous force and energy of the knight's fighting, but I think it unlikely that any of the knight's tourney opponents are responsible for the lady's death as the fighting is very impersonal. The narrator, although he mentions each opponent by name, seems indifferent to them personally and does not reveal any grievance toward them; he is merely pleased to defeat them because they are renowned for their fighting prowess. The narrator wins the tourney purely through the strength of his sustaining image of the woman rather than any inherent military strength which he might possess. This accounts for the irony of his tone and the bitterness which taints his triumph; he wins because of his grief.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Morris was in many ways a proto-feminist. In his poetry and prose-romances Morris presents us with a ideal world in which the sexes are equal: often confused, often unhappy, but equal. In *The Earthly Paradise* Morris shows a refreshing lack of delicacy in discussing sexual attraction, creating women who are as eager, responsive, and forthright as men. In *The Defence of Guenevere*

poems women experience desire as strongly, and suffer for the repression of that desire as strongly as the men.

'The Wind', rare amongst the *Guenevere* poems, appears to actually record an act of sexual consummation but this merely precedes a death rather than substituting death for sex. The knight of this poem, like many of the speakers in *The Defence of Guenevere*, is imprisoned, or spell-bound. He sits in a curiously carved chair hung with green cloth on which 'an orange lies, with a deep gash cut in the rind', and is afraid to move from his chair lest 'it will scream, and the orange will roll out far, / And the faint yellow juice ooze out like blood from a wizard's jar'. This orange could be read in surreal vaginal terms due to its gash, but it is also a symbol of literal wounding, of blood and war. Like 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' the speaker of 'The Wind' associates violence and death in war with violence and death in love. The speaker's fear of what could happen to the chair and the orange lead him to think of 'those who went last month to the war' and thence to a psychological re-enactment of the day on which his lover died.

This story has dream logic, the colours are vivid and glowing as in a dream, but it is a silent dream as neither the man nor woman speak. The knight and lady go walking on a hillside in spring. A sexual encounter takes place not unlike the one imagined by John in 'Geffray Teste Noire':

And still I held to her arms till her shoulder touch'd my mail,  
Weeping she totter'd forward, so glad that I should prevail,  
And her hair went over my robe, like a gold flag over a sail.  
(I, p. 108)

Again there is an Edenic setting, the women's hair falling over the man's mail, but this time the woman is more yielding. The couple appear to have sex, but the narrative is so disturbed and disturbing that it is hard to believe that the sexual act is an enjoyable one. Both parties are wracked by some unknown anxiety:

I kiss'd her hard by the ear, and she kiss'd me on the brow,  
And then lay down on the grass, where the mark on the moss is now,  
And spread her arms out wide while I went down below.



All is marked (literally, by the mark on the moss) with guilt and foreboding. Prior to the sexual encounter the knight appears to accidentally bash Margaret's head against the tree as she is trying to get away from him: 'I held to her long bare arms, but she shudder'd away from me, / While the flush went out of her face as her head fell back on a tree'. This is unintentionally comic. Perhaps Margaret is so stunned by the blow to the head that she allows the knight to 'prevail'? In any case, after the sexual transaction takes place the knight performs a common lover's gesture: he covers the body of his beloved with flowers. But again, this offering is not rendered in joyous terms— it is peculiar and chilling. Margaret is still breathing, but is ominously silent as her lover continues covering her with daffodils as if she were already a corpse. He wanders off 'for an hour' (strangely impolite post-coital behaviour) and returns to bury her deeper in the phallic daffodils 'and cast them languidly lower'. Then he uncovers her:

My dry hands shook & shook as the green gown show'd again,  
Clear'd from the yellow flowers, and I grew hollow with pain,  
And on to us both there fell from the sun-shower drops of rain. . . .

Alas! alas! there was blood on the very quiet breast,  
Blood lay in the many folds of the loose ungirded vest,  
Blood lay upon her arm where the flower had been prest.  
(I, p. 109)

Death by daffodils? There is no explanation for Margaret's death. Is it, perhaps, a post-coital haemorrhage? She may have been murdered by a passer-by while the knight was jaunting in search of more daffodils, but this seems very unlikely. What is more likely is that Margaret has been elected to be the one to pay for the sexual knowledge that both have 'enjoyed'. The literal cause of Margaret's death is unexplained.

The nightmare recollection of this event causes what the knight has feared most: he screams and leaps from his chair as 'the orange roll'd out far'. The poem is in many senses a nightmare within a nightmare, a curtailed nightmare since we do not get to see what happens next. Many of the poems in the *Guenevere* volume are like this: dramatic set-pieces which open and close at indeterminate points.

The locus of 'Spell-Bound' is a wide field covered in golden corn somewhere near a church. The speaker begins his evocation of his lady's plight by means of a metaphorical identification of the waiting bride (ripe woman as land fit for cultivation?) and the land. In many *Guenevere* poems one lover is envisaged by the other in a sort of vision which then becomes palpable to the reader and the speaker— but are we meant to believe that the other person has come alive in truth and we are communicating with their consciousness or that we are merely reading the lover's interpretation of that consciousness? The knight's vision of his lonely betrothed becomes progressively more psychologically realistic, poignant and intense. Morris's description of the nervous suffering of the woman is simply told but sympathetic and arresting:

How many hours did she wait  
For me, I wonder? Till the day  
Had faded wholly, and the gate

Clanged to behind returning knights  
I wonder did she raise her head  
And go away, fleeing the lights;  
And lay the samite on the bed,

The wedding samite strewn with pearls;  
Then sit with hands laid on her knees,  
Shuddering at half-heard sounds of girls  
That chatter outside in the breeze?  
(I, p. 104)

The knight hears the woman's song celebrating desire and touch, and bemoaning its loss. As in 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' and 'The Wind' Morris shows that he is very much concerned with men and women physically touching each other. The woman's song concerns a dream she has of reunification with her lover; it is similar to Christina Rossetti's 'Echo', but 'Echo' is a stately, smoothly sad poem, whilst this song is disjointed and bold:

*Sometimes I have a little rest  
In fairest dreams, when on thy face  
My lips lies, or thy hands are prest*

*About my forehead, and thy lips  
Draw near and nearer to mine own;*

*But when the vision from me slips,  
In colourless dawn I lie and moan,  
  
And wander forth with fever'd blood,  
That makes me stare at little things,  
The blackbird screaming from the wood,  
The sudden whirr of pheasants' wings*  
(I, p. 105)

This is an example of vivid, glamorous Pre-Raphaelitism, of overwrought colourism. The last stanza of the song demonstrates what Florence Boos called 'presentation of detail to mirror psychic stress'.<sup>40</sup> Like D. G. Rossetti's speaker in 'The Woodspurge', Morris's singer (or the knight who mediates the song) is in a state of intense emotional disturbance in which every small thing, every sight and sound, is writ large.

After the song ends, we return to the knight and his matter-of-fact summary of the situation:

*Yet now I wait, and you wait too,  
For what perchance may never come,  
You think I have forgotten you,  
That I grew tired and went home.*  
(I, p. 106)

He then imagines his lady coming to him, a vision which transmutes into a sort of reality. The knight has been imprisoned in this field by a wizard whilst the lady has been at home keeping his sword just as Elaine of Astolat kept Lancelot's sword. The ending, like the rest of the poem is fragmentary and peculiar:

*And you have brought me my good sword,  
Wherewith in happy days of old  
I won you well from knight and lord;  
My heart upswells and I grow bold.'*  
  
*But I shall die unless you stand,  
— Half lying now, you are so weak,—  
Within my arms, unless your hand  
Pass to and fro across my cheek . . .*

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<sup>40</sup> Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 3.

Perhaps he dies. Many of the *Guenevere* poems end in the death of the chief protagonist. This poem could be seen as a companion-piece to 'Golden Wings', another very peculiar poem which I will discuss at the beginning of the next section of this chapter entitled 'Ladies'.

(ii) *Ladies*

'He is not dead, but gone away'

'Golden Wings' shows the real story of the bereft woman, the story imagined by the knight in 'Spell-Bound'. It is a complex and riddling poem which opens with a long description of Ladies' Gard, a gingerbread fantasy of a medieval castle:

Many scarlet bricks there were  
In its walls, and old grey stone;  
Over which red apples shone  
At the right time of the year.

On the bricks the green moss grew,  
Yellow lichen on the stone,  
Over which red apples shone,  
Little war that castle knew.  
(I, p. 116)

This is an idyllic place where moats serve as waterways for love-boats rather than as a means of protecting the inmates of the castle:

. . . there was a boat  
Of carven wood, with hangings green  
About the stern; it was great bliss  
For lovers to sit there and kiss  
In the hot summer noons, not seen.

The drawbridge too, is no longer a security device but has become a pretty toy:

The painted drawbridge over it  
Went up and down with gilded chains.  
'Twas pleasant in the summer rains  
Within the bridge-house there to sit.

In the eighth stanza we learn the swans are fed on cakes and bread instead of water-weeds and have their own red and gold house. Ladies' Gard is a place where there is no war or unpleasantness of any sort, where no one draws blood or even weeps. There seems to be no wind: 'The banners seem'd quite full of ease', and instead of gargoyles the turrets are decorated with flowers: 'The battlements could get no frown / From the flower-moulded cornices'.

In the twelfth stanza we are finally introduced to the inhabitants of this haven of repose who all are knights and ladies with French names—Miles, Giles, Isabeau, Alice, Big Sir Gervaise, Ellayne le Violet, Mary, and Constance. Jehane du Castel beau, who from her name we might recognise as the mistress of the establishment, is set apart from the others because of her lack of a beau:

She had none with whom to sit  
In the carven boat at noon;  
None the more did Jehane weep  
She would only stand and keep  
Saying: "He will be here soon."  
(I, pp. 117-18)

The other inhabitants (or are they 'inmates'?) live a life of perpetual foreplay in an immature world where all pleasures are regulated and everyone wears a kind of uniform:

Whosoever wander'd there,  
Whether it be dame or knight,  
Half of scarlet, half of white  
Their raiment was . . .

Pleasure in trivial pursuits seems to be compulsory in Ladies' Gard. Jehane is the outsider, the nonconformist of the group who is most definitely not having a good time:

Each wore a garland on the head,  
At Ladies' Gard the way was so:  
Fair Jehane du Castel beau  
Wore her wreath till it was dead.

Little joy she had of it . . .

White pertains to purity and innocence but also means deathly stasis, whilst red means life and passion but also violence and bloodshed. The wearing of the red and the white and the garland is regimented. Jehane plans to opt out of Ladies' Gard by absconding with her knight whom she sings to using the phrase 'Golden Wings'. In 'Golden Wings', a short story published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the narrator's name is Lionel and his heraldic emblem is a pair of golden wings on a bright blue background. Jehane calls to her lover using his heraldic symbol as a pet-name. Running away from the assembled company she strips off her uniform and begins singing a song of entreaty to her absent lover. Given her near-nudity and her excitement, her song is appropriately erotic and morbid:

The water slips,  
The red-bill'd moorhen dips.  
Sweet kisses on red lips;  
Alas! the red rust grips,  
And the blood-red dagger rips,  
Yet, O knight, come to me!  
(I, p. 119)

Jehane free-associates violent and erotic images: she thinks of a bird drinking from the water in the moat, the red of its beak and the see-saw motion of its drinking head remind her of red lips kissing (sipping at each other). This image calls up an image of a sword or knife blade rusted red with dried blood, leading further to an image of a dagger in action. Jehane is in catatonic state. This wild singing: 'wild words that rung / A long way over the moonlit land' is a symptom of madness. She has dissociated herself from the group and is in a limbo state, no longer of Ladies' Gard, but still tentatively resident there.

Receiving no answer to her song, like the woman in 'Spell-Bound' who is also the keeper of her lover's sword, Jehane goes in search of him. She walks outside, carrying his vast sword and chanting:

"I have thrown off the white and the red,  
And pray God it may come to pass  
I meet him; if ten years go by  
Before I meet him; if, indeed,  
Meanwhile both soul and body bleed,

Yet there is end of misery . . ."  
(I, pp. 121-22)

I have discussed the Princess in *The Prince's Progress* as a parody of the listless, enervated maiden. Morris's maidens, like Jehane, are rarely listless, although they often die their deaths are not attained through passive acceptance. Jehane dies literally covered in gold. Dawn is her epiphany:

Oh Jehane! the red morning sun  
Changed her white feet to glowing gold,  
Upon her smock, on crease and fold,  
Changed that to gold which had been dun.  
(I, p. 122)

Jehane's death breaks the spell that had kept an artificial peace at Ladies' Gard:

The apples now grow green and sour  
Upon the mouldering castle-wall,  
Before they ripen there they fall:  
There are no banners on the tower.

The draggled swans most eagerly eat  
The green weeds trailing in the moat;  
Inside the rotting leaking boat  
You see a slain man's stiffen'd feet.  
(I, p. 123)

In 'The Blue Closet' (written to accompany D. G. Rossetti's painting of the same name<sup>41</sup>) two sister-queens Lady Alice and Lady Louise and their two female attendants have been imprisoned in a tower for some years. Every Christmas eve they are permitted to sing one song. The substance of their song is a plea for the return of Queen Louise's lover, Lord Arthur. Lord Arthur has returned to them once before and sprinkled snow all over Louise's head. This gesture could be seen as sexual, perhaps it connotes ejaculation. It certainly seems erotic: 'He watch'd the snow melting, it ran through my hair, / Ran over my

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<sup>41</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 90, volume 2, plate 115.

shoulders, white shoulders and bare', but it could have another meaning. Arthur may wish to imbue Louise with 'dusty snow' because it comes from wherever he has been and he wishes her to return there with him. On Arthur's last visit he had various peculiar things to say. For example, he tells Louise that he cannot weep for her: ' "For my tears are all hidden deep under the seas; / In a gold and blue casket she keeps all my tears . . ." ' Is this unspecified female some sort of siren, or a subaqueous sorcerer? The reference is clearly reminiscent of *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies.  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his bell.  
(*The Tempest*, I.ii.400-06.)

Arthur cannot cry because his tears are kept in a gold and blue casket beneath the sea. This casket sounds very much like a treasure chest or jewellery box; so it would make sense that it contained pearls, since tears are often described as pearls. In *Goblin Market*, for instance, Laura buys the fruit with a lock of hair and a tear 'more rare than pearl'. Arthur's eyes undergo many a sea-change throughout the poem. First he says he cannot cry because his tears are held captive, then he speaks directly of his eyes: ' "But my eyes are no longer blue, as in old years; / "Yea they grow grey with time, grow small and dry" '. Lady Louise has begged her sister not to sing too loud lest ' "you drown the faint boom of the bell; / He is weary, so am I" '. Lady Louise seems to be weary of her of imprisonment and stasis, whereas Arthur may be weary of being undead without Louise. Arthur is summoned as one who is dead but the ladies themselves are unsure whether he is asleep or dead, whether he will return to them or not, and how he was killed. The poem hints at drowning, but Louise and Alice appear to think he may have been strangled by persons unspecified with Louise's scarf. Louise prays for his return, and for some unaccountable reason, this year he does return. He looks worse than he did last time; in fact, he looks like a deteriorating corpse. He is pale, his lips are grey, his hair covered in rime. Earlier his eyes were grey, now



they are blue again, but they are unseeing. Arthur asks the sisters to lead him away, because he has become blind:

"My eyes are full of sand,  
What matter that I cannot see,  
If ye take me by the hand".  
(I, p. 113)

In *The Tempest* passage quoted a little earlier we were told: 'Sea-nymphs hourly ring his bell'. The bell of 'The Blue Closet' only tolls for an hour on one night of the year. The bell seems to toll of its own accord, but Lady Alice, Lady Louise, and their attendants may well be some kind of sea-nymphs, as there are suggestions in the poem that the Blue Closet is under water. Arthur is connected with the sea. In the Blue Closet the lady's song prompts sea-salt to ooze through the tiles of their room. This, along with the description of their locale as 'Between the wash of the tumbling seas' suggests that the blue closet may be beneath the sea. Margaret Lourie, who has explored sources of 'The Blue Closet', claims that Morris may have been influenced by Thorpe's *Northern Mythology*. This is a reasonable supposition given that some of the stories from *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* were clearly influenced by Thorpe, particularly 'The Lindenberg Pool'. Lourie points out that in a story from Thorpe entitled 'The Bell-Pond' a bell rings from the depths of the pond every Christmas during the hour from twelve until one.<sup>42</sup>

'The Tune of the Seven Towers' may also have a mad narrator.<sup>43</sup> A woman most probably called 'Fair Yoland' who narrates the poem begs her knight (named Oliver) to go to an abandoned, haunted tower to retrieve some garments and jewellery which belong to her. She describes the state of 'Seven Towers' in detail: it is full of ghosts who roam around inside and paddle in the moat with their Coleridgean 'Long hair in the wind afloat'. The castle is impervious to soldiers: 'Its gates will not open

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<sup>42</sup> Margaret Lourie, 'The Embodiment of Dreams: William Morris' "Blue Closet Group"', *VP*, 15 (1977), p. 196.

<sup>43</sup> Rossetti's watercolour of the same name can be found in Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 92, volume 2, plate 130.

to any row / Of glittering spears', but she asks Oliver 'will *you* go alone?'. Yoland appears to be playing a sexual cat and mouse game with Oliver. She tells him:

I am unhappy now,  
I cannot tell you why;  
If you go, the priests and I in a row  
Will pray that you may not die.  
(I, p. 115)

Then she bribes him with sexual favours:

If you will go for me now,  
I will kiss your mouth at last;  
                                  [*She sayeth inwardly*]  
(*The graves stand grey in a row.*)  
    Oliver, hold me fast!  
(I, p. 115)

Yoland either wants Oliver to die since she will get sexual satisfaction out of kissing him and sending him to his death, or she wants him to go as a test of his love for her. In either case Yoland is hardly an ideal mate since she would either risk Oliver's life, or risk terrifying him to death, for the sake of her treasure. The narrative is open-ended, but there is a strong likelihood that, in common with most of the dream/fantasy poems of the *Guenevere* volume, the narrator is mad. This madness is connected with sexual desire—the 'end' of this poem (an 'off the page' end which we cannot know) will most probably be marked by the consummation of death.

### III Sirens and Sorcerers

D. G. Rossetti

(i) *Sirens*

'And round his heart one strangling golden hair'.

As a painter D. G. Rossetti is known as a 'lover' of women. This has become a fact of popular culture. As the *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Calendar* 1994 states, in enviably succinct prose:

He drew Lizzie Siddall continuously. He was intoxicated by her beauty which was the inspiration for most of his long line of paintings of heavy-lidded sensual women. Another inspiration was William Morris' wife, Jane, who was also his mistress and a startlingly beautiful woman. The spirit of women remained his one persistent pre-occupation and at least half of his work was a forceful endeavour to express this permanently.<sup>44</sup>

Although founded in biography, vague in parts and inaccurate in other parts, the passage quoted above is not substantially better or worse than many other more scholarly commentaries on Rossetti's paintings of women. It is hard to know what to make of these paintings, as the *Calendar* blurb to January's pin up (*May Morris* {c. 1873}) remarks:

Although Rossetti was rather sexually driven, there is little of the cynicism that often accompanies such sensuality in his depiction of women. Women for him were a mystery.

Like most clichés, this has an element of truth. History holds that Rossetti was in love with Elizabeth Siddall and Jane Morris (perhaps successively, perhaps simultaneously). He also had a long liaison with Fanny Cornforth, and other models were doubtless lovers. He was a devoted brother to Christina and Maria Rossetti, and, above all, a demonstrative and fond son of Frances Polidori Rossetti. Rossetti also had many female acquaintances and friends, yet still women were a 'mystery' to him, or rather a 'fascination'.

One of the eons-old barriers between the sexes, and consequently one of the bases for the subjugation of women, has been the idea of women as the unknowable. The massive, sensuous but self-absorbed women of Rossetti's oil paintings of the 1860s-1880s are all, in some way, unknowable. Their gaze, for instance, never meets the viewer; they are sexual, yet contained; knowing, yet remote. These women with

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<sup>44</sup> (Waterloo, Australia: The Ink Group, 1994).

emblematic names and floral accompaniments may be suspended some place between life and death, like *Beata Beatrix* (1864), potentially dangerous like *Venus Verticordia* (1864-8) and *Lady Lilith* (1868), or frankly terrifying, like the queen of sirens *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), but they are all essentially unknowable. In 'The Stream's Secret', parts of *The House of Life* (especially the 'Willowwood' sequence) and in the prose piece *Hand and Soul*, some commentators have thought that Rossetti has presented woman as the anima — that he tried to depict the woman 'who is his own soul.'<sup>45</sup> In the ballads with which I will deal in the following two sub-sections of this chapter, rather than depicting woman as anima, however siren-like she may be, Rossetti has explored the characters of women in love.

'The Blessed Damozel', perhaps Rossetti's most famous poem, has caused dissent amongst critics. This dissent hinges on two main areas. The first relates to Rossetti's placement of the Damozel in a literal, ornamented heaven. The second point concerns the problem of point of view in the poem: do we ever see or hear the Damozel directly, or is the whole experience presented to us in the poem conveyed to us through the point of view of the bereft male on earth? A battle was played out over twenty years ago between Harold Weatherby and Jerome McGann over Rossetti's use of ornamentation.<sup>46</sup> I will add to this battle with some remarks of my own which emerge from a reading of 'The Blessed Damozel' alongside Christina Rossetti's 'The Convent Threshold'. For over the century since its first publication (an early version was published in *The Germ* in 1850, Rossetti probably began composing the poem in 1847) people have been upset by Rossetti's vision of a concrete, detailed heaven. Rossetti has been accused of all sorts of things, but mostly, as has been pointed out in recent years, these criticisms seem to stem from a Christian bias. As one view has it Rossetti 'has stepped on some

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<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, 'The Image of the Anima in the Work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *VN*, 45 (1974), pp. 1-7.

<sup>46</sup> Harold L. Weatherby, 'Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', pp. 1-19. Jerome McGann, 'Rossetti's Significant Details', *VP*, 7 (1969), pp. 41-43 is partly written in reply to Weatherby.

Christian toes'.<sup>47</sup> Weatherby's criticisms of ornamentation in Rossetti's poetry seem to belong to this school. Yet it is strange that Rossetti should be accused of offending Christians by his use of ornamentation in his description of heaven, since the view of heaven given in *Revelation* is extraordinarily literal: heaven is made of glass and gold and precious jewels.

The first thing nearly all commentators of the poem note about the Damozel is her corporeality, most resonantly expressed in the opening lines:

The blessed damozel leaned out  
 From the gold bar of Heaven;  
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth  
 Of waters stilled at even;  
 She had three lilies in her hand,  
 And the stars in her hair were seven.  
 (Works, p. 13)

Most critics quote the most ridiculed line of all: 'Until her bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm'. The Damozel resembles a cartoonist's version of a supra-earthly woman: golden haired, curvaceous, her hair flaming with stars, her eyes deep and probing. This woman has lived for ten years in a heavenly penthouse high above the earth and higher even than the sun and the moon which is beautifully pictured: 'the curled moon / was like a little feather/ fluttering far down the gulf . . .').

'The Blessed Damozel' is essentially a fantasy poem in the sense that much of the poem is the bereaved male's vision of the Damozel, but it is by no means an idealised vision since the man does not imagine what he would like to be true. Rather he witnesses a situation which he does not relish. What is most striking about 'The Blessed Damozel', once we get past the trappings of the gold bar, the seven stars and the citherns and citoles, is the ordinariness, the domesticity of the Damozel's experience of heaven. Firstly, for the most part the Damozel seems very happy in her new abode. Going to heaven is, after all, coming home to God. The

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<sup>47</sup> Ronnalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 40.

comfort of family, and fraternity (or sisterhood, since Mary is served by many handmaidens) is emphasised throughout the poem. The Damozel is at peace, her eyes are deep and her look is 'still'. Although she has lived in heaven for ten years she is still awestruck by the fact of where she is, and she is unconscious of the lengthy passage in which she has been absent from earth.

The poem has three narrators: an unknown, neutral narrator (which may or may not be a projection of the bereaved lover), the voice of the lover which is shown in parentheses, and the voice of the Damozel herself. In the fourth stanza we hear the voice of the lover for the first time. From his words we intimate his grief, and are jarred but also touched by his (presumed) hallucination that her hair falls around his face as, we suppose, it once did on earth. After this stanza the lover does not speak again for some considerable time and we have yet to hear the damozel speak. The next part of the poem describes the Damozel's literal position in the universe. Like Jehane of Morris's 'Golden Wings' she seems to be the only single person among couples who meet, unite, and travel to God together:

Around her, lovers, newly met  
 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,  
 Spoke evermore among themselves  
 Their heart-remembered names  
 And the souls mounting up to God  
 Went by her like thin flames.  
 (*Works*, p. 4)

Our next interpolation from the lover is again an hallucination. He hears birdsong and imagines it to be the voice of the Damozel. Her speech is sweet and measured, not tortured and anxious. The Damozel is past suffering for passion. She quietly and confidently recites her wish that her lover will come to heaven and be united with her and then describes what they will do there together. She speaks as if she were inviting him to a family gathering and is predicting how he will fit into the usual family activities. She is supremely calm. The lover, in contrast, is intensely anxious. He responds wildly to her assurances to herself ('overheard' by him) that they will together soon:

(Alas! we two, we two, thou say'st!  
 Yea, one wast thou with me  
 That once of old. But shall God lift  
 To endless unity  
 The soul whose likeness with thy soul  
 Was but its love for thee?)  
 (*Works*, p. 5)

There are many points of similarity between 'The Blessed Damozel' and 'Christina Rossetti's 'The Convent Threshold'. In both poems women are either in heaven, or about to be in heaven. The novice of 'The Convent Threshold' speaks as if she is in heaven but she is in fact still living and is about to enter a convent. She is in the throes of renouncing sexual love, although she wishes to be reunited with their lover in heaven in a way which sounds sexual. The novice is confused and tormented by her decision to take on the life of the cloister. She worries that she will lament the absence of her earthly lover once she is in heaven:

How should I rest in Paradise,  
 Or sit on steps of heaven alone?

....

Should I not turn with yearning eyes,  
 Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?  
 (I, p. 63)

The Blessed Damozel's pang is not so terrible, whereas the speaker of 'The Convent Threshold' may well find heaven hell were she to live there alone. The speaker of 'The Convent Threshold' repeatedly importunes her lover to 'repent': repent of their previous sexual involvement presumably, so that he can be redeemed and they can be reunited in heaven.<sup>48</sup> I think the man in 'The Blessed Damozel' is frightened that this is the kind of repentance that the damozel expects of him and he

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<sup>48</sup> Although she does not provide any evidence to substantiate her views, Jan Marsh claims that the story of 'The Convent Threshold' (which Marsh consistently mistitles as 'On the Convent Threshold') 'is that of the love between Heloise and Abelard, taken without acknowledgment from Alexander Pope's version of *Eloisa to Abelard*.' See Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 214. As is well known, Heloise and Abelard had a sexual relationship which Heloise found very hard to renounce as did Abelard, at least until he was forcibly castrated.

feels unable to perform it. Just as his vision of the Damsel is corporeal, so is the man's desire for her. He does not want spiritual union, he wants physical union: ' " . . . one wast thou with me / That once of old" ' and he fears he will not be permitted to enter heaven because he has no religion aside from his love for the lady: 'The soul whose likeness with thy soul / Was but its love for thee'. The man knows, more or less, that he is never going to get to heaven. This is the sadness at the heart of the poem: the narrator's awareness that reunion is impossible. This is the reason for the Damsel's tears at the end of the poem. In effect they are her lover's tears since she is his creation.

This is like the view of the poem taken by Paul Lauter. Lauter claims that all the action of 'The Blessed Damsel' is viewed through the eyes of the narrator on earth and that the substance of the poem is his 'deluded, grief-stricken vision of the dead woman.'<sup>49</sup> In my view the Damsel's sadness is unconvincing since she is fundamentally unconvincing for the very good reason that she is not real. She is a fabrication, a vision of the lover. In D. G. Rossetti's painting of the same name *The Blessed Damsel* looms out of the sky above the lover's head.<sup>50</sup> Her look is calm as she leans protectively over the gold bar, but she does not lean forward to beckon. Her head on one side, she gives a gesture of benediction; her eyes are lowered, but she cannot see the man who reclines in the grass in a somewhat dreamy pose. The Damsel has escaped sexuality; this is why the man is sad— not because she is dead, but because she is no longer sexual.

*Jenny* is a far more compelling and stimulating work about prostitution than the crude *Found* (begun in 1854) a painting Rossetti never managed to finish despite many years work.<sup>51</sup> The painting depicts a blowsy prostitute (Fanny Cornforth, herself most probably an ex-prostitute) wearing gaudy clothing, staggering, turning her face to the stone wall in an agony of shame and degradation as she is recognised by

<sup>49</sup> Paul Lauter, 'The Narrator of "The Blessed Damsel" ', *MLN*, 73 (1958), p. 345.

<sup>50</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 244, volume 2, plate 355.

<sup>51</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 64, volume 2, plate 65.



her rustic ex-sweetheart who has literally stumbled across her in the city as he takes his (symbolic) cow to the market. *Found*, and parts of *Jenny* recall Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' of 1866. Hardy's poem plays with the idea of the prostitute finding prosperity, finery, and a zest for life and leisure once she is, as she matter-of-factly states, 'ruined', much to the shock and envy of her rustic maiden former friend:

'— I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,  
And a delicate face, and could strut about town!—  
'My dear— a raw country girl, such as you be,  
Cannot quite expect that. You aint ruined,' said she.<sup>52</sup>

*Found*, was, for Rossetti, a surprising subject. As Surtees puts the matter:

Not surprisingly Rossetti found this subject a wearisome one, for . . . 'Rossetti . . . was . . . thoroughly indisposed towards attempts to ameliorate anybody's condition by means of a picture.'<sup>53</sup>

Why then did he feel compelled to do just that by means of a long poem? *Jenny* was one of the works of which he was most proud.<sup>54</sup> This does not mean that we should identify him with the narrator, that 'young and thoughtful man of the world' who encapsulates much of the ambiguity of the age towards sexuality and prostitution. *Jenny* is one of comparatively few poems which Rossetti set in his own time. This posed certain problems for him. He did not wish to invalidate his poem by making it coy, neither did he wish to scandalise his relatives; in the end he did

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'The Ruined Maid', in *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English*, ed. John Leonard (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 152.

<sup>53</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 64, who quotes one of the members of the original brotherhood, F. G. Stephens.

<sup>54</sup> In a letter to Thomas Gordon Hake, Rossetti stated:

I am glad you like *Eden Bower*. I think that poem, *Jenny*, *A Last Confession*, and *The House of Life*, are the things I would wish to be known by.

See *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, eds. Oswald Doughty & J. R. Wahl (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, p. 384.

neither. By making his narrator 'sincere', vacillating, desirous but abstinent, both self and society blaming, but also wildly condemning of the evil and degradation of the prostitute *per se* in comparison to the 'Pure Woman' idealised in the mid Victorian era, Rossetti steered a middle course.

The Blessed Damozel was domesticated and de-sexualised by heaven—the sexual longing in the poem belongs chiefly to the man. Jenny, like the Blessed Damozel, is essentially absent from the poem since it is a dramatic (but interior) monologue in which Jenny does not speak and scarcely stirs. Jenny, like the Blessed Damozel is a siren, but she is essentially unsexual. Jenny is, in fact, almost pre-pubescent in her childishness. Florence Boos saw Jenny thus:

Jenny is a weak, trivial person, attracted solely to money, personal finery, and gaudy luxuries, at best innocent of her own deeds and oblivious to her sordid future . . .<sup>55</sup>

These comments crystallise the essence of Jenny: she is a child with all the greediness, fondness for frippery and short sightedness which characterises childhood. In picturing Jenny as a child Rossetti can distance his narrator's sexual desire from its object. Although he finds her beautiful and she is, of course readily on offer: 'warm sweets open'd to the waist', Jenny's childishness serves to repel him. The narrator's hesitation to make the inevitable transaction stems as much from her childishness as his moral and societal imperatives. The narrator envisions Jenny as a country lass, but we have no reason to suppose she would cower against a wall if 'found' by an ex-lover. In fact we have no opportunity to discover how Jenny would react in that situation or any other. Jenny is silenced by the narrator of the poem who, like Hamlet, cannot shut up but will not act. In the end he protests too much and becomes an ineffectual, if 'sensitive', bore.

D. G. Rossetti also wished to be remembered for his long dramatic monologue *A Last Confession*. Like 'The Blessed Damozel' and *Jenny*, *A Last Confession* features a domestic angel/siren. *A Last Confession* is about

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<sup>55</sup> Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 156.

the perils of sexuality and the potential for repressed sexuality to produce evil. A powerful incest motif runs through the poem. It is the story of a man who lusts for his adopted daughter, her rejection of him, and his murder of her. As in many of the poems discussed in this chapter sexuality and violence are vividly conveyed to the reader but they are violence and sexuality *recalled*; they are the erotic histories of the past narrated through the memory of the protagonist.

On his death bed the confessor-narrator tries to tell a priest of the passion that led to murder. He begins by speaking of a knife:

Our Lombard country-girls along the coast  
Wear daggers in their garters: for they know  
That they might hate another girl to death  
Or meet a German lover. Such a knife  
I bought her, with a hilt of horn and pearl.  
(*Works*, p. 44)

He buys a knife as a present for his estranged adopted daughter, a present which he acknowledges has no other purpose but to kill, but which he hopes will be 'a pledge between us' or a parting gift. Ironically, it proves to be both.

The incestuous love which the narrator feels later on is presaged near the beginning of his story in his telling of the story of the shattered Cupid. He gives the girl a glass figure of Cupid, a talisman of his love which she accepts as a child but cannot reciprocate when she is a woman:

"I gave him to her and she loved him so,  
And he should make her love me better yet,  
If women loved the more, the more they grew".  
(*Works*, p. 47)

The glass figurine falls from the wall, glass fragments are embedded in the little girl's palm, the narrator cries: ' "That I should be the first to make you bleed, / Who love and love and love you!" ' a bitter future-echo of his later wish to 'be the first' sexually, and his unleashing of literal floods of blood when he eventually murders her. Robert Buchanan objected to the poem on the grounds that it 'positively reeked of morbid lust'. William Michael Rossetti commented: 'Where is the

reek apparent?'.<sup>56</sup> I agree with Buchanan rather than William Michael Rossetti. The poem reeks with morbid lust because this is the subject of the poem. Paternal love is transformed into lust by a lonely man tired of war who idealises this lust and sees it as something else. This lust becomes increasingly morbid the more it grows. On the receipt of gleeful childish kisses, the narrator's reaction is inappropriate:

[She] leaped  
Up to my neck and kissed me. She was still  
A child; and yet the kiss was on my lips  
So hot all day where the smoke shut us in.  
(*Works*, p. 47)

The closer the girl comes to being a woman, the more violent does the narrator's lust grow, and the harder it is for him not to acknowledge it to himself. He is terrified of her growing form because he fears how he will react to it. At fourteen she is beginning to be proudly self-conscious of her maturation. In her excitement she flaunts her rapidly growing sexual power:

And drew her long hands through her hair, and asked me  
If she was not a woman; and then laughed:  
And as she stopped in laughing, I could see  
Beneath the growing throat the breasts half-globed  
Like folded lilies deepset in the stream.  
(*Works*, p. 48)

The girl grows into an eminent Pre-Raphaelite beauty with the exaggerated lips of Rossetti's paintings of women, particularly his many paintings of Jane Morris. The narrator suffers a twin agony in watching the girl grow up: like any father he fears that she will leave him and is jealous of the world that will receive her when 'she seemed to tread / Beyond my heart to the world made for her' and he is also sexually jealous of other men. His lust and fear lead to a misapprehension of the girl, a misogyny which in his mind turns an ordinary teenager craving change into a wanton, a siren. As he tells the priest:

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<sup>56</sup> 'Notes', *Works*, p. 649.

You have not known  
The dreadful soul of woman, who one day  
Forgets the old and takes the new to heart,  
Forgets what man remembers, and therewith  
Forgets the man.  
(*Works*, p. 52)

The narrator has spent many years in fear for his life; he is alone, his world is the girl, and he considers that she betrays him (we never discover why she leaves, how long she has lived without her father and with whom she lives) by leaving him. At the fair where he buys the knife on his way to see the girl the man evades potential 'bounty-hunters' (he calls them 'blood-sellers') by participating in a clown's act. It is at this moment of fear, desperation and humiliation (from secret soldier to clown) that he hears the whore's laugh which a few hours hence will act as the catalyst for murder:

A woman laughed above. I looked up  
And saw where a brown-shouldered harlot leaned  
Half through a tavern window thick with vine  
Some man had come behind her in the room  
And caught her by her arms, and she had turned  
With that coarse empty laugh on him, as now  
He munched her neck with kisses, while the vine  
Crawled in her back.  
(*Works*, p. 53)

In his detailed and dignified reply to Buchanan's scathing attack 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' Rossetti described the harlot's laugh thus:

. . . the hideous character of which, together with its real or imagined resemblance to the laugh heard soon afterwards from the lips of one long cherished as an ideal, is the immediate cause which makes the maddened hero of the poem a murderer . . . no poet or poetic reader will blame me for making the incident recorded in these seven lines as repulsive to the reader as it was to the hearer and beholder.  
(*Works*, p. 618)

When the girl laughs at his gift of the knife the speaker's disgust at the perceived crude animalism of the whore's laugh prompts his murder of her, described in biblical terms as the end of the world:

And then came a fire

That burnt my hand; and then the fire was blood,  
And sea and sky were blood and fire, and all  
The day was one red blindness . . .  
(*Works*, p. 54)

Years later, the man is still haunted by the vision of the girl with the pearl-handled knife stuck through her heart, wringing the blood from her long dark hair, and on his deathbed he confesses to the priest while the vision of the girl lingers in the shadows.

One of the most salient features of *A Last Confession* is that it is essentially a tale about a man who has incestuous longings. True, the relationship, if it had been consummated, would not have been incestuous in the eyes of the church or the law, but still it is incestuous in nature since the narrator has raised the abandoned child as if she were his daughter and she has no doubt loved him as a daughter. As Ronnalie Roper Howard asserts, we have no reason to suppose that the girl has any feelings for her guardian aside from those of a loving daughter: 'Evidence that she ever considers him as a lover or as anything but a father is noticeably absent in his narrative . . .'<sup>57</sup> *A Last Confession* is a dramatic monologue and we can only know what the narrator confesses to the priest in a long, rambling, emotive speech in which he is at least tacitly asking forgiveness for murder. We do not directly see or hear the girl. In the early parts of the confession we hear her words as a child, and later, her words on attaining maturity but these words are all retold to us by her murderer. It is significant that at the end of the poem and the end of the girl/woman's life she is not given an opportunity to speak, she laughs and is murdered.

In a footnote to his article on *A Last Confession* Carl A. Petersen stated: 'Like most commentators, I assume that the girl *did* take a German lover.'<sup>58</sup> I find this an extraordinary reading. There is no evidence in the poem for such an assumption. True, the narrator appears to fear that the girl will grow (or has grown) into a sexually pernicious woman, the type

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<sup>57</sup> Ronnalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass*, p. 99.

<sup>58</sup> Carl A. Peterson, 'Rossetti's *A Last Confession* as Dramatic Monologue', *VP*, 11 (1973), p. 131.

of woman who may perhaps take German lovers or even become a prostitute, but this is surely the point: his own lust makes him see the girl as lustful, as the whore he would like her to be, but only for *him*. In offering the girl the knife, a phallus, as a token between them, the man is offering himself sexually, this is why her implied rejection of him drives him to murder.

Much of Rossetti's poetry is about guilty sexuality, perhaps none more so than his long unfinished ballad 'The Bride's Prelude.'<sup>59</sup> Here Amelotte, young and 'normal', and her elder sister, Aloyse, tormented, afflicted and 'diseased'<sup>60</sup> speak together in a bridal chamber in the hour before Aloyse is meant to be married. Aloyse's speech takes the form of a fitful, fevered confession. In the last year of his life Rossetti referred to the poem as 'unelevated and repulsive.'<sup>61</sup> Perhaps Rossetti found the poem 'unelevated and repulsive' because of the atmosphere of diseased, guilty sexuality with which it is permeated.

Discussions of the poem frequently mention the word 'atmosphere'; the poem has an overwrought, suffocating atmosphere of heat, oppression and silence. This 'atmosphere' is partly produced by the stasis of the poem. Originally called 'Bride-chamber Talk', all of the 'action' of the poem occurs within the confines of the young women's chamber. The poem is also stifled by closely observed details.<sup>62</sup>

The narrative itself exists in a state of suspension— descriptions of Aloyse's pauses make up much of the space taken by the poem. As William Michael Rossetti drolly comments: 'If only one hour was

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<sup>59</sup> Like *Found*, 'The Bride's Prelude' seems to be one of the works which Rossetti, for whatever reason, found too difficult to finish. He began composing the poem in 1847-9, took it up again in 1859-60, wrote a prose plan for its completion in 1878 and published it, unfinished, in 1881.

<sup>60</sup> Ernest Fontana, 'Fragment and Disease: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Bride's Prelude*,' pp. 5-11. Fontana (who mistakenly calls 'Aloyse' 'Alonse' throughout) discusses 'The Bride's Prelude' as a 'diseased' or fragmented text.

<sup>61</sup> See *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, IV, p. 1861.

<sup>62</sup> Florence Boos's discussion of the poem, for instance, is entitled 'Ornamented Passivity and Stagnation'. See Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 104.

remaining yet, the heart-sore bride would surely have made more haste towards her conclusion'.<sup>63</sup> Aloyse is loath to complete her confession just as she is loath to be married, and the whole poem resists closure, resists completion. Just as Guenevere's long speech before the pyre is at least partly intended to stall her accusers until Launcelot arrives, Aloyse is in no hurry to be married to a man she hates. The reason she hates him is not disclosed in the narrative. There are a number of mysteries in the poem. Aloyse's hatred of Ursclelyn is not sufficiently explained, we do not know whether or not her child is dead, and we do not know why she has now agreed to marry Ursclelyn. Rossetti wrote a somewhat tentative and patchy prose account of how he intended to finish the poem. In his plan Rossetti has Ursclelyn return as a rich soldier. Meanwhile Aloyse is secretly (how else?) betrothed to a young knight whom she loves, Ursclelyn maliciously kills this knight and Aloyse is forced to marry Ursclelyn because her brothers think that the marriage would be advantageous even though they may be planning to murder him after the wedding. However the poem remains a fragment. Ironically, even Rossetti's comments on the fragmentary nature of the poem exist only as a fragment:

It has been written so many years, and is so much less tempting to take up than a new thing, that, if I venture to follow the perilous precedent of Coleridge, and to print it as it has long stood . . . [the sentence remains unfinished]  
(William Michael Rossetti's editorial comment, 'Notes', *Works*, p. 648)

Underlying these mysteries is a more fundamental one: why is Aloyse so sickly *before* she meets Ursclelyn? The central issues of the poem are Aloyse's sickness and sexual guilt neither of which are explained in the narrative as we have it, nor would they be explained if Rossetti had finished the poem according to his plan. Aloyse is ill *before* she falls from the horse. She has been brought up in a convent and, on

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<sup>63</sup> 'Notes', *Works*, p. 648.



returning to her family's estate proves herself to be a creature paralysed by neurotic illness. Indeed, she can barely *walk* let alone ride:

My limbs, after such lifelong theft  
Of life, could be but little deft  
In all that ministers delight  
To noble women: I  
Had learned no word of youth's discourse,  
Nor gazed on games of warriors,  
Nor trained a hound, nor ruled a horse.  
(*Works*, pp. 20-21)

It is not strange that a convent girl is untrained in worldly games and social niceties as well as more athletic pursuits, but Aloyse's weakness is extraordinary and has a morbid origin. In the convent she must have walked around, prayed, done some form of work surely, so how is it that a young woman is so physically inept and afraid? Aloyse was no happier in the convent than in the court. She is ambivalent about the church; she does not love 'holy things', she says, but neither does her sentimentality allow her to enjoy seeing religion turned into fashion:

But though I loved not holy things,  
To hear them scorned brought pain, —  
They were my childhood . . .  
(*Works*, p. 21)

Throughout the poem Aloyse demonstrates a strange attitude towards religion; both she and her sister Amelotte invoke the names of Jesus and Mary time and time over, but Aloyse appears irreligious, even witchlike, in her constant talk of curses. She feels cursed but she also keeps biting back unspecified curses against unspecified people. Aloyse's sexual knowledge has made her feel cursed and has turned her into a curse-whispering, listless harridan.

Aloyse's injuries after she has fallen from her horse are also left unspecified. Her foot is bandaged at one point and leeches are applied but for the most part she speaks of her illness in such a way that it could be anything, or indeed, nothing. In the end we do not even discover how she is cured. Urscelyn, as we are later told, is of Aloyse's family but is illegitimate (his shield is 'barred athwart') and he has no land, yet when we first hear of him and his priestly medical talents this seems no bar to

Aloÿse's involvement with him; or if it is she does not mention it. Of course, sexual intimacy alone without benefit of clergy would be a 'crime' for a medieval princess but she does not speak to her sister of Urscelyn's origins as contributing to her shame in sex. Rather it seems that sex itself is the reason for her overwhelming sense of shame.

Urscelyn claims that he has a new treatment which will cure her, a treatment of which the family may not approve; therefore he begs leave to come to her at midnight to 'cure' her. His 'cure', is, of course, sex. Aloÿse is afraid of him, but she tells her sister that she fell in love with him. Her swift declaration ('And lo! I loved him') is abbreviated, flat and unconvincing, given the dread and hatred which now imbue her references to him. In my view Aloÿse is either too passive to resist Urscelyn or too morbid to think that she deserved a better fate. Aloÿse receives no pleasure from the relationship henceforth, unless it is a pleasure too shameful to communicate to her sister. In 'The Defence of Guenevere' we saw that Guenevere was proud of her love: she bragged of the majesty of her passion for Launcelot. For Aloÿse there is only shame: the word shame is repeated many times throughout the poem. So covert are the nocturnal activities of Aloÿse and Urscelyn, and so vague, guilty and loath to describe them is Aloÿse, that she seems the victim of prolonged sexual abuse. Aloÿse's reactions to her situation, her piteous weakness, her reluctance but need to confess, her wish to die from sheer lethargy and suffering are all reminiscent of the responses of an incest victim. The 'affair' has all the hallmarks of an incestuous relationship (which it is not as they are only cousins and cousins are usually permitted to marry) because of its extreme secrecy and the fact that Aloÿse is betrayed into something dishonourable which she does not fully understand.<sup>64</sup> Aloÿse casts herself as the victim. In her extreme passivity she seems parodic at times, as Boos has commented:

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<sup>64</sup> After I had written this passage I was fascinated to discover a note at the back of Howard's study which supports my incest hypothesis:

If Aloÿse's mother were also Urscelyn's, several things in the poem would be explained: why Urscelyn is allowed into the family (by the father, who feels guilt for the mother's death [murdered for adultery after the birth of an illegitimate child?]) and makes recompense for her memory by accepting her illegitimate son, and later by forgiving Aloÿse; and why Aloÿse's child is killed (being the result of an affair

Aloÿse is the embodiment of a particular early Victorian stereotype of the heroine— swooning, hypochondriac, self-pitying, creatress of an intense circular emotionality. It is as though someone were heating a small porcelain kettle but closed all the valves. Sometimes the monotony of passive pain seems to parody both Victorian ideals of womanhood and the suffering romantic hero.<sup>65</sup>

Aloÿse resembles Fanny of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* who has to be encouraged to walk and ride in order to improve her health, but eventually wins her man through a kind of monstrous insipidity. Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* makes herself ill through a surfeit of emotionalism, but she makes a 'healthy' marriage in the end and she has much more energy and vitality than Aloÿse. Aloÿse is a perverted sister of Christina Rossetti's Princess from *The Prince's Progress*: a violated and corrupted Princess. Silver noted that Guenevere was beginning to show signs of a corrupt nature in 'The Defence of Guenevere' which were more fully developed in 'King Arthur's Tomb'. Aloÿse's nature, corrupted by hypochondriac illness even in her girlhood, is further corrupted by her experience of covert sexuality. Given these circumstances it is only 'natural' that she should hate Urscelyn, regardless of whether or not he abandoned her and her family during the plague or whether he murders her lover (are they too lovers in the physical sense I wonder?) later on. Aloÿse, in her warped loneliness turns on the cause of her perverted feelings. This is her only outlet: to hate and curse Urscelyn. 'The Bride's Prelude', then, is a study of the corrupting powers of sexuality. It is set in a complicated societal framework of laws of church and court, of kinship, property and marriage, but essentially the problems stem from Aloÿse's own nature as well as the wrong doing which she experiences at the hands of Urscelyn and her family. She is not only fatally passive, she becomes a vindictive victim of a world she cannot understand. If she had the power to fully articulate her curses her hatred

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not only illicit but also incestuous. (Howard, p. 200) [my clarification interpolated]

<sup>65</sup> Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 110.

would drive her to metamorphose from unwilling siren to willing sorceress, to join her sisters in the female arts where sexuality is bound up in magic.

## (ii) *Sorcerers*

'Once again shall my love subdue thee . . .'

Just as some of the 'sirens' dealt with in the previous section were hardly 'sirens' at all, but were merely perceived as such by the men who victimised them, so the heroine of D. G. Rossetti's long poem 'Rose Mary' is scarcely a sorcerer at all. Rather she is a 'white witch' punished for sexual sin.

I found that *The Blessed Damozel* was a kind of domestic siren transported to heaven. Mermaids are the original sirens who, poised with mirror and comb, called sailors to their death. *The Blessed Damozel* calls her lover to his death. She cannot be reunited with her earthly lover until he has repented and is dead, but he is not certain that he is suited for heaven and the kind of relationship they might be able to have there. Jenny, the prostitute whose fatal attractions seduce moral men, is found to be just a childish country girl. Though they abide in extraordinary circumstances (heaven or a harlot's bedroom) the most salient aspect of *The Blessed Damozel* and Jenny despite their exotic roles is their ordinariness. *A Last Confession* is also essentially a domestic tale as it is set within a family and concerns incestuous desires which lead to murder once the young woman/daughter escapes the father/lover by leaving the domestic home. 'The Bride's Prelude' too, is set within the domestic scene: all of the 'action' of the poem as it exists in fragment form is obsessively confined to one breathless room in which the overwrought Aloyse makes her confession to her sister.

Much of the poetry of D. G. Rossetti is about sexual guilt and secrecy: 'The Bride's Prelude' and 'Rose Mary', in particular, deal with covert sexual dealings, betrayal, and violence. In 'Sister Helen' and 'Eden Bower' the domestic siren becomes the vengeful sorcerer once she has been

denied natural justice for sexual betrayal— she takes up traditional feminine black arts to protect her interests and wreak her revenge.

Rose Mary, a domestic angel enjoying a saintly, close relationship with her mother (she is apparently devoid of close male relatives) is about to be married to Sir James of Heronhay. James has set off on a trip. He is to be shriven at Holy Cross. Could this be the usual procedure before marriage so that he can start life afresh, or is it penance for a particular sin? The important thing is that some danger is suspected on the way so Rose Mary's mother has her look into the beryl stone, a type of crystal globe, to scry it and foretell any possible dangers ahead on the road for Sir James. We are not informed whom the assailants might be or the cause of their grievance. Rose Mary looks into the beryl stone, but one part of the road is obscured in mist. The next day James is carried dead to Rose Mary's castle. Her mother is full of pity for him until she discovers a packet of love letters on his body bound with yellow hair (Rose Mary's hair is black) from Jocelind, the sister of the Warden of Holycleugh. James has made a pact with Jocelind and has thus betrayed the (now) deflowered Rose Mary. From Rose Mary's failure to predict James's murder Rose Mary's mother divines that she is no longer a virgin, but she forgives her tenderly. Rose Mary learns of James's death but not of his perfidy. In an agony of grief and anger Rose Mary cleaves the beryl stone, releasing the evil spirits and bringing about her own death. In heaven she will be rewarded as a true lover since her love for James was genuine although he played her false, and he will gain his just punishment in hell.

At the beginning of the poem Rose Mary is pictured as an innocent, there are even indications that she is holy; her mother addresses her as 'Mary mine that art Mary's rose'. Rose Mary is either a handmaiden or adornment of the Virgin Mary, and the rose is also an indicator of secrecy, *sub rosa*. Holy innocence has long been associated with the power of prescience. The condition that the scryer be a virgin, whether they are male or female, has a long tradition.<sup>66</sup> Therefore Rossetti was not

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<sup>66</sup> Clyde D. Hyder, 'Rossetti's Rose Mary: A Study in the Occult', *VP*, 1 (1963) p. 199 notes this as does Lafacadio Hearn, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets* (London: Heinemann, 1923), p. 84.

necessarily being sexist by having Rose Mary 'punished' for her unchastity by seeing awry in the beryl-stone. The actual scrying takes up many stanzas in the poem, the reader not realising that Rose Mary will be misled by the evil spirits of the beryl because neither the reader nor Rose Mary or her mother know that Rose Mary's (still secret) act has displaced the good spirits. Rose Mary's mother tells us that good (read 'Christian') spirits rule the beryl and always shall 'save only for a Christian's sin'.

Rose Mary is semi-hysterical throughout most of her ill-omened reading of the stone. Whether this is because she knows that something may go wrong because of her guilt, or because she is in an excitable state through fear of injury to her lover, or simply that she is in a kind of trance is difficult to tell. Rose Mary is pale, she shrieks, shrinks to the floor 'blindfolded' in her hair and after the reading she immediately falls asleep.

There are ironic hints early on indicating that Rose Mary may not be pure. Her mother, for instance, continually refers to her impending marriage in terms of her virginity: 'A bride you'll be, as a maid you are'. After the reading, as the Mother puts the stone away we learn its motto: 'None sees here but the pure alone'. If the stone had played fair Rose Mary would simply have been unable to see into it. As it is, the evil spirits of the stone trick her by allowing her to see all but the crucial valley where the Warden of Holycleugh and his men lay in wait for James of Heronhay. It is a mean trick.

The beryl stone itself is a gorgeous bauble:

With shuddering light 'twas stirred and strewn  
Like the cloud-nest of the wading moon;  
Freaked it was as the bubble's ball.  
Rainbow-hued through a misty pall  
Like the middle light of the waterfall.

Shadows dwelt in its teeming girth  
Of the known and unknown things of earth;  
The cloud above and the wave around,—  
The central fire at the sphere's heart bound,  
Like doomsday prisoned underground.  
(*Works*, p. 120)

But it is inhabited by evil spirits who sing malignant songs. Most commentators have thought that the beryl songs which were added to the poem at a late date in composition were at best a nuisance. Do they contribute anything to the poem? The beryl spirits tell us of Rose Mary's 'sin' before she or her mother do, they confirm that they managed access to the beryl through this sin (it is 'a love-linked sin') and they also sing ominously of Rose Mary's betrothed so that we can be fairly sure he will be killed. As Rose Mary's mother later laments, the spirits play games: ' . . . they can seal the sinful eyes, / Or show the truth by contraries'.

When Rose Mary is told of James's death she reacts with an intensity of physical response common to distraught Pre-Raphaelite heroines; she is wracked with pain until mind and body give in to the pressure and she faints. Aloyse was too passive, too enervated to scream, thrash about or faint, but Rose Mary has more spirit:

Once she sprang as the heifer springs  
With the wolf's teeth at its red heart-strings.  
First 'twas fire in her breast and brain,  
And then scarce hers but the whole world's pain,  
As she gave one shriek and sank again.  
(*Works*, p. 127)

Her mother thinks that Rose Mary will eventually recover: 'Ah! not with the heart the body dies!', but her lack of romanticism is proven incorrect. Rose Mary dies for love but she does not pine and fade away instead she brings death upon herself in a decisive, catastrophic act.

Joan Rees has written of 'Rose Mary':

The story is essentially one of a devil figure, a male siren, subjecting the innocent to his evil blandishments . . . But the relation between Sir James and the spirits of the beryl stone is never made clear.<sup>67</sup>

I disagree. Sir James never appears (in life) in the poem. As such he is an absent villain, but to call him a devil figure is a wild exaggeration. The beryl spirits may be evil, but James is simply unfaithful. He will be

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<sup>67</sup> Joan Rees, *The poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: modes of self expression*, p. 120.

punished for his unfaithfulness, he dies and will go to hell, but to see anything devilish in him is a distortion of the poem. Sir James is like the rural lords of Christina Rossetti's ballads who lightly love and just as lightly abandon. There is *no* connection between Sir James and the 'dread spirits of desire' who reside in the beryl. In most Pre-Raphaelite poetry males are most interesting as agents for change in women, rather than interesting for their own sakes and they are usually presented as betrayers. This is all that James is. His only interest for us lies in his death and his betrayal which is concealed from Rose Mary who dies believing that she will be reunited with him in heaven. The central issue of the end of the poem is that Rose Mary will be forgiven because her love in essence was pure and true; she will be renewed in death. Rose Mary's courage in breaking the beryl led to her death, but thence to her rebirth. She dies as a tragic heroine, covered in glory; whilst Sir James dies as yet another feeble philandering male, killed in hatred.

'Sister Helen' resembles a traditional medieval ballad much more closely than the over-elaborate 'The Bride's Prelude' and 'Rose Mary' although its verbal complexities are beyond the capacities of most ballads. 'Rose Mary' may be called a sexual revenge ballad in an indirect sense since the spirits of the beryl have taken delight in causing death and discord (a type of revenge for their existence) on the man and woman who invoked them through an act of sexual congress, but 'Sister Helen' is a sexual-revenge ballad proper. Rose Mary never found out that James had betrayed her (and in heaven his memory will be expunged from her mind), but Helen has discovered that her lover, Keith of Ewern, has married another woman. Sister Helen is full of hate, but she is not innately evil. She is that classic figure in literature, the woman scorned. Helen triumphs in the destruction of the male, but Keith is not an entirely *innocent* male: his unfaithfulness has led to the tragedy. It is clear that Keith has indifferently abandoned Helen after they have shared love tokens which he attempts to return to her near the end of the poem: a ring and a broken coin. Christina Rossetti's Maude Clare likewise shared love tokens with Lord Thomas. These tokens are very important as they legitimise the pledge between the woman and the man. They bespeak an



engagement of sorts or at the very least an understanding which is binding.

Some of Christina Rossetti's ballads in which women are betrayed are informed by various issues; in 'Cousin Kate' a woman who has a child by a Lord is abandoned in favour of her cousin who would not part with her virginity without marriage, and in 'Maude Clare' Maude Clare accuses Lord Thomas for marrying Nell for her land. In Morris's ballads men are much more constant in their affections. Marriages are usually prevented due to violent death rather than the fickleness of the male. What is significant in the work of all three poets is that for one reason or another the heroine can never marry her man. In 'Sister Helen' we do not know why Keith abandons Helen, just as we do not know why Sir James abandons Rose Mary. Men are 'like that' it seems, and women take revenge in different ways: Maude Clare makes a scene at the wedding, Cousin Kate is delighted with the possibility that her cousin will never have children whilst she has already provided an heir, and Morris's Medea in *The Life and Death of Jason* sends her rival an exploding wedding cloak and murders her children (a favourite revenge tactic of mythological women). In later versions of 'Sister Helen' Rossetti softened his original picture of Helen. In the final version she is more human, more cognisant of the fact that she has condemned herself as well as her ex-lover to perpetual torment.<sup>68</sup> Sister Helen's hate is transmuted love and her act is essentially a self-destructive one since, like the speaker of *A Last Confession*, she kills the thing she loves.

Helen slowly murders her ex-lover by means of melting a voodoo effigy. She practises her witchcraft in the presence of her exuberantly childlike young brother, whose innocent questioning acts as a foil to Helen's gleeful, ironical replies. There are two worlds depicted in the poem: the indoors world where Helen systematically, with steady, obsessive concentration enacts her revenge, and the outside world from which the emissaries of her ex-lover arrive to beg Helen's mercy. A

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<sup>68</sup> The poem was first published under the initials H. H. H. in the *Düsseldorf Annual* in 1854. It appeared with some modifications in *Poems* in 1870 and was again reworked and published in the 1881 volume. See 'Notes', *Works*, p. 650.

succession of people come to plead with Helen via her little brother who does not fully appreciate what is happening, for him the visitors and their pleas are part of a game which gradually comes to frighten him whilst for Helen they are the literal answer to her 'prayers'. First kinsmen of Keith (all named Keith) come and plead, not for his life but for his soul, followed by Keith's father (also called Keith!) then his bride (Bride of Keith?) who is compelling in her silent tears. It becomes increasingly clear throughout the poem that Helen's revenge will be damning Keith's soul rather than simply killing him. Her revenge will be eternal but in damning him she too will be damned. Much of Pre-Raphaelite love poetry concerns the wish of lovers parted on earth to be reunited in heaven. It is one of the most pressing *leitmotifs* in their poetry. Here the lovers will only be reunited in hell.

As well as performing a literal murder through a metaphorical act much of Helen's game consists of verbal sleights of hand and double meanings. Her sweetest revenge is the revenge she wreaks through language. In Chapter Four I mentioned the original Gudrun of the *Laxdæla Saga* who made blithe witticisms at the expense of her rival Refna on the occasion of Kiartan's murder: these were dreadful, but dreadfully funny. Like Gudrun, Sister Helen attains a goddess-like status in her enjoyment of the suffering of the man who has injured her and this enjoyment plays itself out in language. Her little brother reports to Helen the news given by the emissaries and their requests, and she replies with deadly little jokes:

“The wind is loud, but I hear him cry  
Sister Helen,  
That Keith of Ewern’s like to die.”  
“And he and thou, and thou and I,  
Little brother.”

• • • •

“Three days ago, on his marriage-morn  
Sister Helen,  
He sickened, and lies since then forlorn.”  
“For bridegroom’s side is the bride a thorn,  
Little brother?”

(*Works*, pp. 65-66)

And so on. The verbal killing she makes is infinitely more satisfying to her than the physical murder. She wins through wit, and the reader cannot help but admire her queenly scorn while at the same time pitying the messengers who crowd outside. These messengers are infinitely pitiable: first Keith of Eastholm begs on Keith of Ewern's behalf that Helen release her curse so that he might die; then Keith of Westholm rides to tell Helen that the dying man wants to see her before he dies; he cries for her on his deathbed like a lover calling his beloved. Keith of Keith (Keith's father) follows the Keiths of East and West— he is a frail old man who abases himself before Helen's house so that she might release her hold on his son's soul. Helen particularly enjoys seeing the Baron grovel, but she nonetheless refuses to accompany him to Keith's deathbed. It is significant that the poem has such a rigid spatial structure. Helen will not leave her abode, therefore Helen will not see Keith again: she wants the game played out entirely on her terms in her time and place. She wants them all to come to her. It seems that pride as well as resentment motivate Helen as the mighty lords come and beg her, and she is playfully disdainful but will not be moved, either figuratively or literally. The last visitor is the new bride who will shortly be a widow. This is Helen's crowning achievement: 'Blest hour of my power and her despair' as Helen crows. The bride's hair has turned white with shock and sorrow just as Laura's hair, depleted by the goblin poison, lost its gold tint in *Goblin Market*.

The destruction Helen has courted is hers in both senses of the word. At the end of the poem, as Mégroz and others have noted, the witch Helen has transformed once more into a tragic woman,<sup>69</sup> her trance is passed and her irony assumes lofty pathos rather than cheap galling irony. Both Helen and Keith 'are sadder still' and she identifies his ghost, which has intruded into her room in a way which his messengers could not, as her soul-mate since they are now identical: 'A soul that's lost as mine is lost' as Helen says.

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<sup>69</sup> R. L. Mégroz, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter Poet of Heaven in Earth* (1928; rpt. St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1972), p. 262.

D. G. Rossetti's *Lilith* is as malicious as Helen, and like Helen she has her reasons. Helen and Lilith can be seen as both frightening *fatales* and as hurt women who strike back against those who have injured them. Helen's enjoyment of Keith and his friends' suffering may be ghastly, but the audience somewhat guiltily shares in her enjoyment because of the winning power of her morbid repartee. Lilith's speech is similarly convincing, and compels us to admire her even when she is at her most horrific. If Helen and Lilith had been perceived purely through their victim's eyes, the effect of each poem would be entirely different. If, for example, 'Sister Helen' was set at Keith's bedside rather than Helen's household, it may have tipped the scales of our pity towards Keith, but Helen is our clever confidante, and it is her voice which dominates the poem. Lilith too is allowed to speak her piece in the poem 'Eden Bower' (1869-70), and we never see or hear her victims, Adam and Eve. Lilith is a doyen of enjoying revenge through language just as Helen has proved herself to be. There is no actual physical violence recorded in the poem, but Lilith relishes what she will do in the future. She will tempt Eve in the shape of a serpent, Eve will then offer Adam the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and Adam and Eve will be expelled from Eden. Much of the violence in the poem is a heavily suggested sexual violence. The poem is more about Lilith's attempt to seduce the snake through her tale of intended revenge and her womanly (serpentine?) charms as much as about the revenge itself. But why does Lilith long for revenge? Elree Irene Harris, in her study of the presentation of Lilith in nineteenth and twentieth-century British literature, finds that in many ways Lilith is the new woman. Lilith is made from the earth at the same time as Adam. She is his equal, whereas the more malleable Eve is made from Adam's rib. Lilith is thrown out of Eden because she refused to be under Adam, to obey him. She was the original feminist.<sup>70</sup> At the time of his death a letter detailing much historical information about Lilith was found in Rossetti's possession. The letter, signed Ponsonby A. Lyons and addressed to the *Athenaeum* begins: 'Lilith, about whom you ask for information,

<sup>70</sup> Elree Irene Harris, ' "The Wounded Angel": The Lilith Myth in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Literature,' Diss. University of Utah, 1986.



(*Sing Eden Bower!*)  
Shapes that coiled in the woods and waters,  
Glittering sons and radiant daughters."  
(*Works*, p. 109)

Were serpent children part of God's grand plan? Is this the real reason Lilith was tossed out of Eden— because she produced bestial children? It is interesting that Rossetti endows Lilith with maternal affection, since in most of the myths Lilith is a murderer of children.

Lilith's hatred for Adam is equal to the love she once felt. As Helen quipped to her brother:

"He calls your name in an agony,  
Sister Helen,  
That even dead Love must weep to see."  
"Hate, born of Love, is as blind as he . . ."  
(*Works*, p. 67)

Lilith says: 'And let God learn how I loved and hated / Man in the image of God created' and extends this hatred to God: 'Is not the foe-God weak as the foeman / When love grows hate in the heart of a woman?' Lilith's revenge will be as much against God as against the once-loved Adam and the jealously hated Eve. Lilith is going to wreck God's grand experiment if only the serpent will prove himself amiable to persuasion and lend her his skin. The snake is an indispensable part of Lilith's plot to overthrow Adam and Eve's tenancy in Eden. Lilith, like the spirits of the beryl, may be a trickster. We never discover whether she will grant to the snake all that she promises him, although her sexual favours are certainly guaranteed at least in the short term.

The most disturbing aspect of Lilith's speech is not her plan to trick Adam and Eve. Rather it is the sorcery of her sexuality as she expresses it to the snake. Nearly all of the poem is Lilith's seduction-speech which grows and grows in intensity, resembling a spell or the mounting stages of sexual arousal finally resulting in orgasm. Lilith puts the hard word on the snake, and it is very hard indeed. Some commentators have been revolted by Lilith's forcefulness, her grossness, particularly in her suggestion of sodomy:

"O my love, come nearer to Lilith!  
   *Sing Eden Bower!*)  
 In thy sweet folds bind me and bend me,  
 And let me feel the shape thou shalt lend me."  
 (*Works*, p. 111)

Philip McM. Pittman, in particular, commented: 'The Lilith of this poem must surely rank among the most sordid characters in literature'.<sup>73</sup> I find Lilith's explicitness daring and refreshing and entirely in character with one who is supposed to be a great seducer of men, let alone snakes. Her smuttiness is a measure of her passion, not for sex, but for revenge. Many critics overlook Lilith's love for Adam, and her sorrow on her removal from Eden— how she cried throughout the wedding day of Adam and Eve. Rossetti's Lilith is far more human, far more lovable than most Liliths. Lilith is usually represented as spiritually and physically barren. She does not usually have any children (even snake children), and as mentioned earlier, Lilith is often a murderer of children or a nocturnal succubus, but in 'Eden Bower' Rossetti made her a *femme fatale* with some heart. Lilith preens, struts and brags, but is finally humanly pathetic and sleazy, and we find ourselves unconvinced of her great beauty and powers to allure, since she is so insistent on defining and redefining them.

Rossetti's painting, *Lady Lilith* (1868)<sup>74</sup> is a far less sympathetic rendering of the mythological figure than the Lilith of 'Eden Bower'. Rossetti painted many pictures of beautiful women as the artist's *anima*, but surely this is not what he meant to do with this painting? Perhaps this painting is Rossetti's warning to himself about his own cult of sensuality, cautioning him not to overindulge in sex at the expense of feeling. *Lilith* is a good example of how Rossetti manipulated his paintings by means of attaching legendary or literary names to them. Without its title, the painting *Lady Lilith*, especially in its original form with the soft-faced, ample Fanny Cornforth as model, is simply a boudoir

<sup>73</sup> Philip McM. Pittman, 'The Strumpet and the Snake: Rossetti's Treatment of Sex as Original Sin', *VP*, 12 (1974), p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 205, volume 2, plate 293.

picture of a pretty woman with masses of yellow hair which she is combing whilst looking in a hand held mirror. A male painter is gazing at a female model gazing at herself. Both are viewers of powerful female beauty. When the title is added *Lady Lilith* Rossetti calls up a store of mythological associations.<sup>75</sup> As his fellow Pre-Raphaelite Frederick Stephens wrote of this Lilith:

She has passion without love, and languor without satiety—  
energy without heart, and beauty without tenderness or  
sympathy for others— for her lovers least of all.<sup>76</sup>

This original *Lilith* can now only be seen in a student's copy in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, for in 1872-3 Rossetti repainted it at Kelmscott using Alexa Wilding as a model. The result is rather hideous: the repainted version has neither beauty nor menace, although, frankly I think neither version works. At their worst Rossetti's mythological paintings of women, like his *Pandora* (1871, which also has a poem written for the frame) look like Jane Morris (or Fanny Cornforth, Alexa Wilding or whoever she may be) playing dress-ups in much the same way that Julia Margaret Cameron made beautiful but ludicrous photographs from her friends posing as characters from the *Idylls*.

Rossetti wrote a sonnet entitled 'Body's Beauty' (originally called 'Lady Lilith', later incorporated in *The House of Life* sequence) as a complement to *Lady Lilith*. This poem in turn is a companion piece to a sonnet called 'Soul's Beauty' which complements the painting *Sibylla Palmifera* (1866-70).<sup>77</sup> These companion poems and paintings are meant to represent the siren and the sibyl, the body and the soul. As I pointed out, 'Body's Beauty' is far less sympathetic to Lilith than 'Eden Bower'. Here Lilith takes on her traditional role as a cold-hearted, self-absorbed, seducer of men:

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<sup>75</sup> Lilith appears in the *Talmud* and in Goethe's *Faust*, Part I (1810). For more information on the mythological heritage of Lilith see Allen's article, p. 286, and Harris's thesis, particularly chapters one and two.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 205.

<sup>77</sup> See Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 193, volume 2, plate 285.



Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
 (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)  
 That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
 And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
 And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
 And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
 Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
 Till heart and body and life are in it hold.

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where  
 Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
 And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
 Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
 Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent  
 And round his heart one strangling golden hair.  
 (*Works*, p. 100)

Here Lilith is a true siren, but is the notion of the siren or the female sorcerer or the witch in Rossetti's poetry necessarily a sexist one, an idea detrimental to women? The image of the siren represents male primeval fear of the female and female sexuality, even fear of the castrating possibilities of female sexual organs. But the image of the siren is also an image of vast, intoxicating power. Both Lynne Pearson and Virginia M. Allen record that early twentieth-century feminists during a Woman's Suffrage meeting in 1913 stormed the Manchester Art Gallery and threw rocks at Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca*, recognising the painting, according to Virginia Allen, as a token of Rossetti's anti-feminism.<sup>78</sup> On the contrary, like Pearson I see *Astarte Syriaca*<sup>79</sup> as a celebration of female power. Astarte, a Syrian love deity, is monstrous in her sheer hugeness and muscularity. Hers is an appropriately massive and godlike presence, but she is dignified and as remote as any of Rossetti's women. She would not deign to threaten.

The unknowableness of women in Rossetti's paintings presents us with a choice. We can regard them as overdone and repetitive homages to female beauty, as gross objectifications of women intended for male

<sup>78</sup> Virginia Allen, ' "One Strangling Golden Hair" ', p. 293.

<sup>79</sup> Surtees, volume 1, Cat. no. 249, volume 2, plate 371.

consumption, or as components of Rossetti's continual quest to know women. Many of the oil paintings of the 1860s onwards are in no way portraits of the individual women who modelled for them. These women are simply used as the raw material from which Rossetti embodied his particular vision of the time. This is why the paintings all look the same. They are not paintings of women at all. Rather they are paintings of some ideological concept which Rossetti was trying to portray whilst they are also celebrations of female beauty.

Rossetti's poems are unequivocally attempts to know women, and Rossetti never condemns them. As Boos comments:

Rossetti never presents an unmitigatedly criminal woman in any of his major poems; even Lilith has a certain cause for grievance against God and the Adam who deserted her. However sinning or related to evil forces, all of Rossetti's women of evil deed, and many of his virtuous heroines, have been betrayed by the lust or the vice of men.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti*, p. 145.

## Envoi

'Love, strong as death, is dead.

To few chords and sad and low  
Sing we so . . .'

— Christina Rossetti



UNTESSENTIALLY Victorian, in many ways the Pre-Raphaelite poets dutifully played their roles: Christina Rossetti as the religious recluse, William Morris as the craftsman and blustering reformer, and D. G. Rossetti as the sensual and slightly disreputable bohemian. Yet in the poetry which I have discussed in this study the Pre-Raphaelite poets have revealed themselves in many different ways. Christina Rossetti, until recently seen as a minor, maudlin poet, emerges as a writer with a quite astonishing range who wrote poems which probed the riddles of the identity in relation to sexual love, and poems which, under the guise of fantasy and fairytale, embodied telling commentaries about the sexual and social roles of Victorian women. William Morris, a multi-talented public figure, has too often been underestimated as a poet. In his hidden love-poetry Morris reveals himself to be the most reticent of poets, only reluctantly providing a searing account of a life lived without love, whilst in his portrayal of women he shows himself to be a proto-feminist, and in his bewilderingly surreal dream and fantasy poems he demonstrates a modernist concern with the role of the unconscious in determining patterns of narration which is rare in Victorian poetry. D. G. Rossetti, although in many ways a self-conscious rebel who perhaps adhered more to the ethos of his time than either Christina Rossetti or William Morris, like them attempted to force 'the straits of change'. D. G. Rossetti wrote honestly and unreservedly of the attempt of the individual to find existential meaning through sexual union, and in his poems about women he confronted the Victorian stereotypes of siren and sorcerer, revealing that the women so categorised were more sinned against than sinning.

The poetry of Christina Rossetti, William Morris, and D. G. Rossetti traces the failure of earthly love. The 'silence' and 'confession' of their poetry is derived from their unwillingness to communicate personal

griefs, as well as being founded in the essentially unknowable nature of their experiences. The Pre-Raphaelite poets reached maturity in the mid-Victorian era when old societal forms were crumbling and there were, as yet, few new ones to take their place. Christina Rossetti adhered to her God, Morris to his Socialism, and D. G. Rossetti to his mystic agnosticism. But all felt the lack which they named, or refused to name, as love. The ideal love in which all masks are dropped was characterised by Christina Rossetti in the halting and delicate rhythms of 'Confluents':

As the delicate rose  
To the sun's sweet strength  
Doth herself unclothe,  
Breadth and length;  
So spreads my heart to thee  
Unveiled utterly,  
I to thee  
Utterly.  
(I, p. 199)

## Bibliography

# Notes

The Bibliography lists all works mentioned in this study, and others which, although not cited directly, were of value in its preparation.

The Bibliography is divided thus:

## Primary Texts

Section I: The Pre-Raphaelites

Section II: Others

Section III: Anthologies

## Secondary Texts

Part I: Biographies, Letters, and Other Sources

Part II: Critical Articles

Section I: The Pre-Raphaelites

Section II: Others

Section III: General Articles

Part III: Monographs

## Key to Abbreviated Journal Titles

<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History.</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology.</i>
<i>JPRAS</i>	<i>Journal of Pre-Raphaelite &amp; Aesthetic Studies</i>
<i>JPRS</i>	<i>Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes.</i>
<i>PLL</i>	<i>Papers on Language &amp; Literature</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature</i>
<i>VN</i>	<i>Victorian Newsletter</i>
<i>VP</i>	<i>Victorian Poetry</i>
<i>VS</i>	<i>Victorian Studies</i>

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Appendix A

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II Rossegiar dell' Oriente 'Canzoniere all' Amico Lontano'  
by Christina Rossetti, translated from the Italian as published in  
The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti, edited by R. W. Crump  
(Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990),  
Volume III, pp. 301-312. by Margaret Stewart

June, 1992

The Rosy Blush of Dawn, a collection of lyric poems

Appendix B

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Unpublished Lyrics of William Morris as reproduced in K. L. Goodwin,  
'Unpublished Lyrics of William Morris',  
The Yearbook of English Studies, 5 (1975), pp. 190-206.  
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Appendix C

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Thesis Material Published .

'Identifying William Morris' "The Gilliflower of Gold" '  
Victorian Poetry, 29 (1991), pp. 241-46.



## Appendix A

*Il Rossegiar dell' Oriente*  
'Canzoniere all' Amico Lontano'

by

Christina Rossetti

Translated from the Italian  
as published in

*The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, edited by R. W. Crump  
(Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1990),  
Volume III, pp. 301-312.

by

Margaret Stewart  
June, 1992

as

*The Rosy Blush of Dawn*  
A collection of lyric poems

'To the friend so far away'

## Appendix B

Unpublished Lyrics  
of  
William Morris

As reproduced in K. L. Goodwin,

‘Unpublished Lyrics of William Morris’,  
*The Yearbook of English Studies*, 5 (1975), pp. 190-206.

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## Appendix C

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'Identifying William Morris' "The Gilliflower of Gold" '  
*Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), pp. 241-46.